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When the GROUND Won't STAY STILL

INSIDE

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CEO LOUNGE

Brand relationships are being shaped through alignment, transparency, and lived experience. Attention is moving toward signals that feel grounded and credible.

MARKETS ARE revealing themselves through behaviour that once felt peripheral.

Consumer ambition is shifting shape, trust is being negotiated in real time and institutions are learning that visibility alone no longer guarantees relevance. This edition explores how these undercurrents are influencing the way organisations build products, communicate value, and understand the people they serve.

Across these pages, there is a strong awareness of identity. Purchases carry emotional and social meaning. Brand relationships are being shaped through alignment, transparency, and lived experience and Attention is moving toward signals that feel grounded and credible.

At the same time, organisations are refining how they respond to complexity. Teams are strengthening their ability to interpret nuance, adapt messaging, and build systems that remain connected to changing expectations. Communication is gaining depth and strategy is becoming more attentive to behaviour, context, and long-term trust.

You will also notice how technology is influencing these shifts without fully defining them. Though data is sharpening visibility and AI is accelerating execution, the strongest differentiator continues to be judgement and the ability to understand people beyond metrics alone.

Together, these movements point toward a business environment shaped as much by perception and meaning as by scale and efficiency.

This edition reflects that evolution in motion, where organisations are learning to stay responsive while remaining recognisable in what they stand for.

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Leadership today carries a wider responsibility. It influences how people experience growth, how teams engage with uncertainty, and how organisations sustain alignment through rapid change.

WORKPLACES ARE becoming more aware of the environments they create.

Leadership today carries a wider responsibility. It influences how people experience growth, how teams engage with uncertainty, and how organisations sustain alignment while moving through rapid change. This edition explores the structures, behaviours, and decisions shaping that environment across sectors.

There is a visible emphasis on adaptability. Businesses are refining how they distribute responsibility, develop capability, and prepare teams for changing operational realities. Learning is becoming more continuous. Workforce planning is gaining strategic depth and communication is being shaped with greater precision and intent.

Alongside this, organisations are paying closer attention to culture as a lived experience rather than a stated value. Trust is strengthened through consistency and collaboration grows through clarity. Teams perform with greater confidence when systems support both accountability and participation.

You will also find a recurring focus on how people interpret value. Consumers are approaching brands with stronger awareness. Employees are seeking deeper connection with purpose and direction. And institutions are recognising the importance of coherence between what they express and how they operate.

These developments are shaping organisations that move with steadiness while remaining open to change.

The stories across this edition reflect that ongoing refinement where resilience is built through thoughtful design, aligned behaviour, and the ability to evolve without losing clarity.

Smitu Malhotra
Prof Smitu Malhotra
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EVERY GENERATION reshapes the marketplace in its own way. Some through technology or access and others through the questions they begin to ask before making decisions.

This edition traces a broader recalibration happening across business, culture, and organisational life. Consumers are approaching brands with sharper awareness of identity, ethics, and intent and companies are reassessing how they communicate, build trust, and remain relevant within increasingly segmented markets.

A strong thread running through these pages is the idea of interpretation. The same product can carry different meanings across audiences. Organisations are learning to navigate these layers with greater sensitivity to behaviour, language, and perception.

There is also a growing recognition that scale alone cannot sustain engagement. Attention is becoming more selective. Audiences are filtering information quickly while still seeking signals that feel human, useful, and believable. This is influencing how brands design experiences, structure communication, and shape long-term relationships.

Within organisations, a similar evolution is unfolding. Leadership is becoming more integrated with learning, adaptability, and judgement. Teams are operating within systems that combine technology with human interpretation. Decision-making is gaining a stronger awareness of consequence, continuity, and context.

Across sectors, the ability to remain coherent through change is emerging as a defining capability. Institutions are strengthening themselves by aligning systems with behaviour, and ambition with clarity.

This edition reflects that movement through a range of perspectives connected by a common reality: organisations today are not only managing growth. They are shaping how people experience value, trust, and participation in a rapidly evolving world.

Hari Govind Nair

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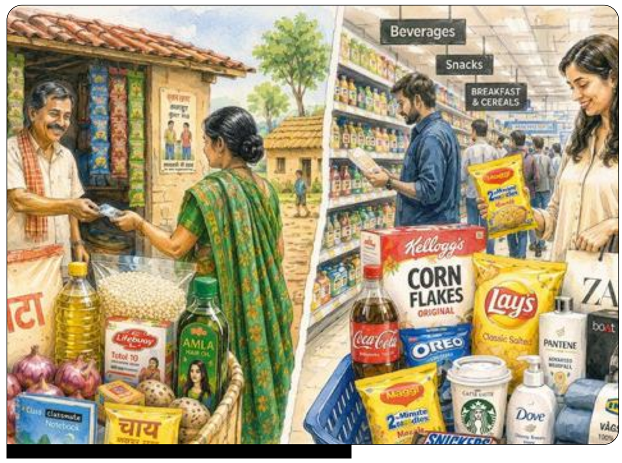


Premiumisation in a Price-Sensitive Market
Why Indians are Trading Up

India's value-conscious consumer is evolving. Easy credit, shifting aspirations and identity-driven spending are quietly redrawing the rules of what 'affordable' really means

Jigyasa Hirawat

For decades, multinationals entering India followed the same playbook: strip the product down, cut the price, and pray the volumes make up for the margins. The logic was simple: Indians are price-sensitive, the middle class is massive, and whoever cracks the ₹10,000 price point wins. It was not entirely wrong advice, at least for a while.

The Death of the Entry-Level Playbook

Recent trends suggest this playbook is effectively dead. Spend 20 minutes at any Tata or Hyundai dealership in a Tier-I or Tier-II city today, and it becomes obvious. The base variant almost sits in oblivion, both for the customer and the salesperson. The pitch starts at mid-trim at best, and usually somewhere higher. In 2024, the unthinkable happened: hatchbacks and minis, once found in every second household, slipped to 28 per cent market share, while expensive, large SUVs gained 50 per cent. Even the electric vehicles are coming in the form of SUVs.

This sudden love for SUVs should not be considered a phase in the Indian economy but rather a real cultural shift.

Many view the pandemic as the point zero of this K-shape change. At the top of the curve, Lamborghini and Mercedes-Maybach posted record sales in India in 2025. Apple broke into the global top five markets. While at the bottom, mass-market FMCG brands are still fighting over single-rupee price hikes. The same economy, two completely different consumption stories running in parallel.

> **The base variant almost sits in oblivion… The pitch starts at mid-trim at best, and usually somewhere higher**

Fintech: The Architect of Aspiration

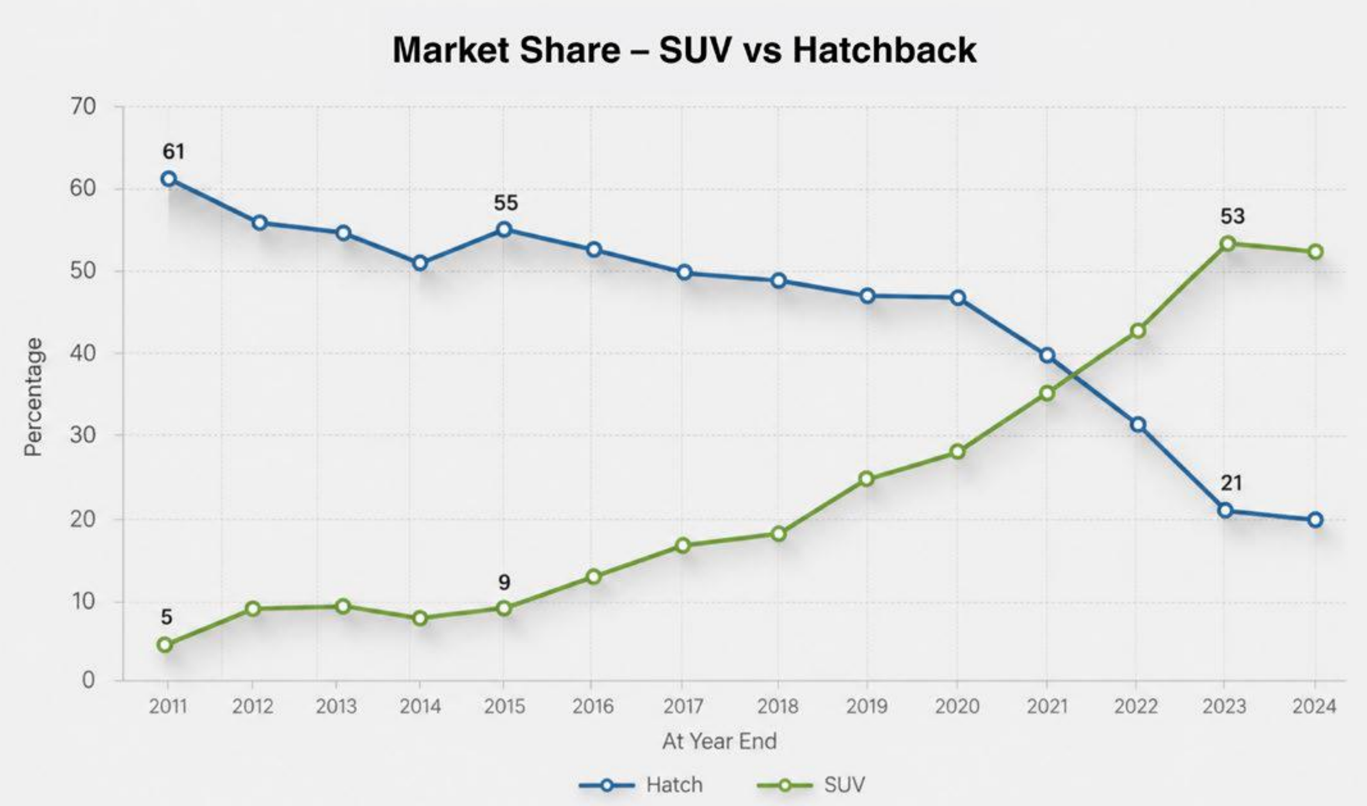
However, we need to perform a retrospective analysis of this shift to understand the driving factor behind the exponential increase in K.

The fractional contribution to this drive is household income growth. However, the dominant contribution comes from fintech, with revolutionary schemes such as no-cost EMIs, low-cost EMIs, and Buy Now Pay Later. These schemes led Indians to ask only one question: "Can I afford this?" Moreover, the answer is almost always a "yes". A ₹1.2 lakh phone becomes ₹5,000 a month. A premium SUV becomes a manageable EMI that fits neatly between rent and groceries. The sticker price is increasingly irrelevant. The monthly cash outflow is the new price point.

This has expanded the addressable market for premium goods in ways that no amount of GDP growth alone could have managed. Young professionals in Coimbatore and Bhopal are buying the same iPhone as someone in Bandra. The geography of aspiration has quietly gone national.

The Legacy Anchor

For companies, this creates an uncomfortable problem. After 30 years of prioritising scale over substance, companies built on cost-cutting cannot simply pivot to an experience-centric model overnight; their institutional instincts fundamentally mismatch the task. Transitioning to a more affluent consumer base requires a set of competencies that lean, efficiency-obsessed organisations often find impossible to execute — namely, the ability to cultivate genuine brand loyalty, invest heavily in long-term customer support, and maintain



Source: Team-BHP.com

> **The consumer is not buying a car or a phone. They are buying a version of themselves they want to become**

premium pricing, even when the historical impulse is to slash rates for volume. That would be more than a strategic pivot for those brands; they would have to rebuild and rewrite their story. That is not a tweak to the existing model. It is a different business.

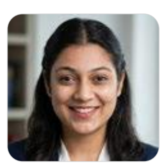
The firms that are winning apprehend this. They are not just selling a better product; they are selling an identity. The consumer is not buying a car or a phone. They are buying a version of themselves they want to become. Brands that have figured out how to sell that story and price it accordingly are cleaning up. Those still leading with discounts and EMI calculators are slowly becoming irrelevant to the segment that actually has money to spend.

India is not becoming a luxury market overnight. However, the consumer in the middle, the one brands spent 30 years designing for, is quietly disappearing, either moving up or getting squeezed out. The "value-for-money" Indian has not gone anywhere. They have just redefined what value means.

The Identity Economy

If one thinks from an eagle's perspective, the sunroof obsession is not really about having a sunroof; it is about owning a vehicle with premium features. Owning an iPhone has become more of a symbol than using its features. New and upcoming brands in India have recognised this demand and are crafting stories that position their products as premium and unique.

More recently, shoe brands like Comet and Gully Labs have been generating revenue and capturing audiences exponentially, something Bata has failed to do. Thus, in the next decade, whoever tells the most unique and premium stories will win India's "affluent 100 million".



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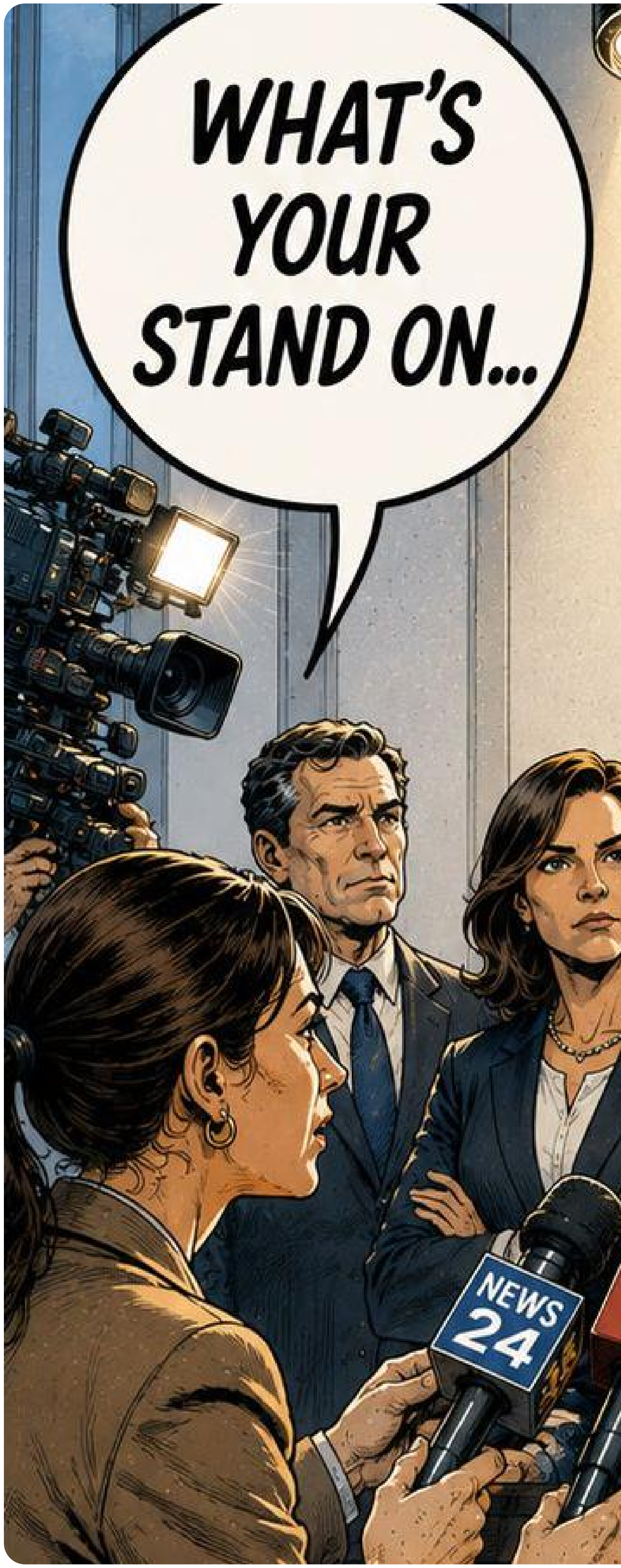
Corporate Neutrality Is Dead Should Companies Speak Up or Stay Silent?

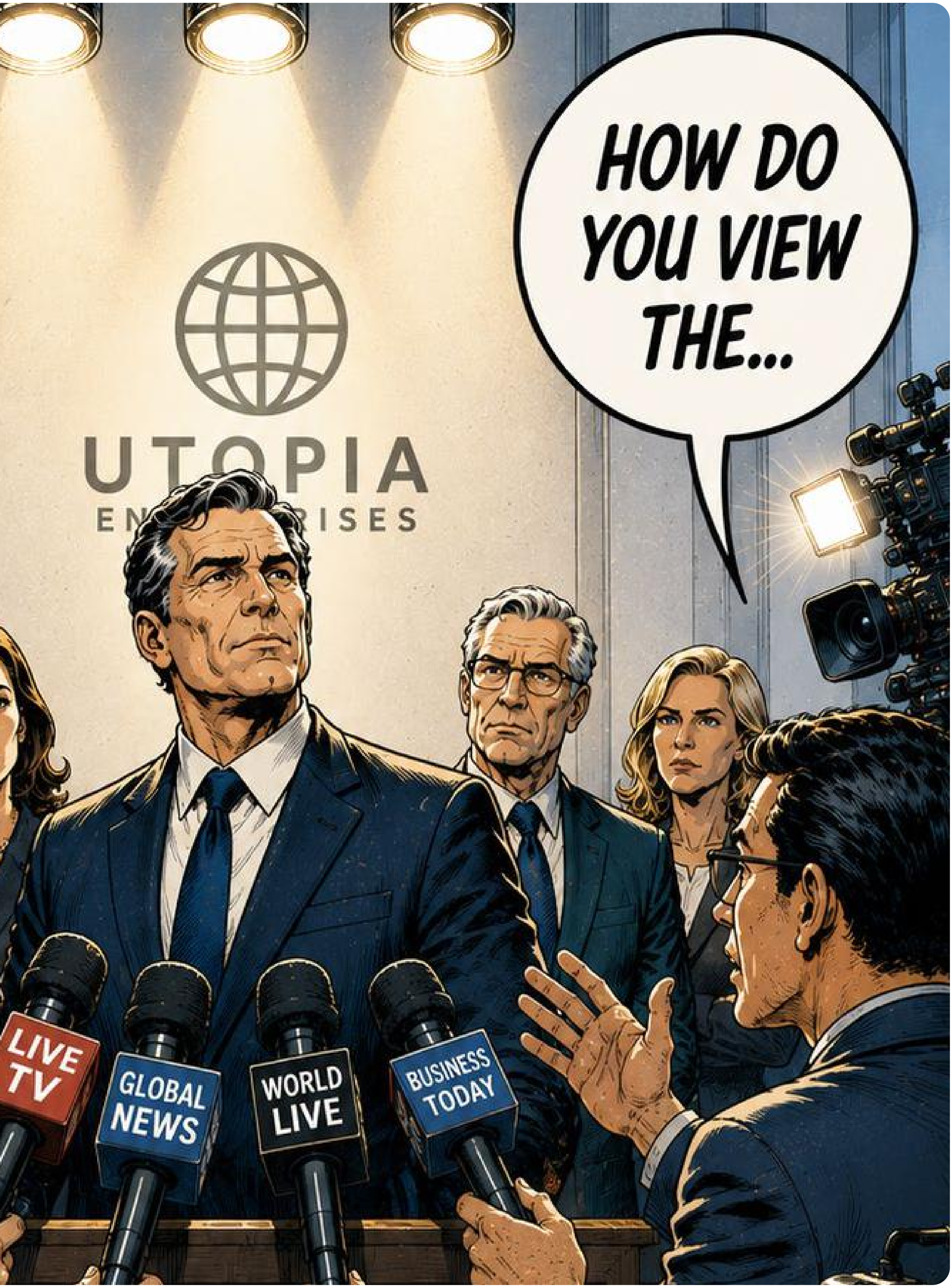
In an era of public scrutiny and value-driven consumers, companies are discovering that both speaking up and staying silent carry reputational risks

Tanika Bisht



In recent years, companies have not just promoted products but also run campaigns to present their values. Ben & Jerry's, a premium ice cream brand, has consistently taken strong positions on sociopolitical issues, strengthening its identity and attracting consumers. But why are companies following this? Is it just about social responsibility, or is it a strategic move to create stronger connections with consumers? In a competitive market, taking a stance can help to differentiate a brand and establish deeper emotional engagement, making it a catalyst for long-term growth.

However, what happens when companies decide not to take a stand? Can silence still be a safe option? When Starbucks once refrained from supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, it faced global criticism for being silent on a contentious social issue. The backlash was enough to force the company to reverse its decision and publicly support the movement. This raises an important question — if silence invites criticism,


UTOPIA
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can companies really afford to remain neutral in today's environment?

The Risks of Taking Sides

The business landscape has changed dramatically. Social media has amplified public scrutiny, making corporate actions more visible and subject to immediate reaction. Consumers today are becoming more value-driven, selecting brands that align most with their beliefs. Employees, too, look to organisations for accountability and purpose. In such cases, are companies really left with a choice, or are they being forced into taking positions whether they want to or not? Neutrality, which was once considered a safe strategy, is now perceived as indifference.

But taking a stand may have its own risks. When Nike went ahead with Colin Kaepernick's protest campaign, it received heavy criticism as well as consumer backlash. While some consumers supported the brand, others chose to oppose it, leading to boycotts and negative publicity. This raises another dilemma — if speaking up invites backlash, is taking a stance really the right approach? Can companies really afford the risk of isolating parts of their customer base?

> **Neutrality, once considered a safe strategy, is now perceived as indifference in an environment shaped by public scrutiny and value-driven consumers**

Clarity Over Neutrality

Despite these issues, taking a stance remains integral in today's business. Why? Because silence, in many instances, can create more long-term damage than temporary backlash. When companies fail to respond to important issues, they expose themselves to the risk of losing trust among consumers and employees. However, organisations that take clear and consistent positions aligned with their core values are more likely to boost credibility and enduring relationships. While criticism may arise, it is often short-

Starbucks faced criticism after refraining from supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, highlighting the growing risks of corporate silence

lived when compared with the impact of appearing indifferent.

Ultimately, the debate is not about whether companies should take a stand but how they should do so. Can businesses find a way that balances their values with stakeholder expectations?

Corporate neutrality is no longer a viable strategy in a world where transparency and accountability are considered important. At the same time, taking a position does not mean it comes without consequences; companies must be prepared to face both support and criticism. In this dynamic environment, the real challenge lies in making thoughtful, consistent decisions because, in today's environment, both speaking up and staying silent come with a cost.

Values Build Trust

What actually differentiates organisations now is not the absence of risk, but how they manage it with clarity and conviction. Companies that take efforts to align their actions with well-defined values are better positioned to build trust, even when disagreement prevails.

Speaking up may invite backlash and, at times, boycotts. Can companies really afford the risk of alienating sections of their customer base by taking a stance?

Indecision or inconsistency can damage credibility far more quickly. This reality demands continuous reflection, adaptability and a commitment to ensuring responsible decision-making across all levels. In this light, corporate neutrality is not a shield, but it is a choice with consequences. Corporate neutrality is dead; what remains is the responsibility to choose wisely.

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"Trust Will Come From Human Signal, Not Synthetic Noise"

Marketing is entering an era where content is exploding but differentiation is collapsing. According to **Dr Mohit Malhan,** Assistant Professor of Marketing at XLRI Jamshedpur, brands can no longer rely on visibility alone; they must earn trust in what he calls a "sea of synthetic noise". Speaking with *Ananya Joshi*, he discusses the rise of agentic AI systems, shrinking consumer attention spans, the growing importance of authenticity, and why the marketers of the future will be defined less by technical skills than by judgement, adaptability and the ability to understand people.

Digital marketing is increasingly seen as a philosophy rather than just a function. How should organisations rethink marketing in a world where the customer controls the journey?
Digital marketing is now being called a philosophy rather than a function. But honestly, marketing was always a philosophy. What's changed is not *what marketing is,* but *who holds the control.* Customers today control their journey. They decide what to see, what to ignore, and when to engage. But that doesn't mean brands are powerless.

If anything, the job of marketing becomes clearer: show up with a consistent, recognisable voice across every touchpoint. Whether it's digital, physical, or somewhere in between, the brand cannot afford to sound like ten different people in ten different places.

So the first shift organisations need to make is simple but difficult: figure out what your brand actually stands for — and then stick to it everywhere.

The second shift is around authenticity. Today's consumers — especially Gen Z and Gen Alpha — are not naïve. They

understand marketing. They know there's an agenda. But interestingly, that doesn't stop them from engaging or buying.

Even in influencer marketing, the equation has changed. Consumers don't necessarily see influencers as 'friends' anymore — but they're still willing to buy from them. It's a more aware, almost transactional trust.

And that creates a real challenge for larger brands. Scale often comes at the cost of authenticity. The question is whether big brands can adapt fast enough to still feel real in a world where consumers are far more perceptive than before.

AI is moving from automation to 'agentic systems' that can make decisions and interact with customers. How does this redefine marketers' roles going forward?
Agentic systems are not coming — they're already here. And 2026 is going to be a big inflection point.

> **A lot of marketing execution – media buying, bid optimisation, content generation – will be automated. But marketers won't become less important; they'll become more strategic**

A lot of what marketers do today — media buying, bid optimisation, content generation, even real-time responses — is going to get automated. Teams will get leaner. Execution will get faster.

But here's the shift: marketers don't become less important — they become more strategic.

When machines take over execution, humans get pushed up the value chain. Marketers will have more time — and more responsibility — to think about the bigger questions: What does the brand stand for? Who is the customer really? What should we say — and just as importantly, what should we not say? That's where the real leverage will be.

At the same time, this doesn't become a fully automated world. We're moving towards hybrid intelligence — AI doing the heavy lifting, with humans still shaping direction and judgement.

Because here's the reality: we're already seeing a flood of AI-generated content — what people are calling 'AI slop.' And customers are getting tired of it. When everything starts to sound the same, the role of human judgement becomes even more critical.

Even in areas like customer interaction, where automation is increasing — think of trying to reach a human on platforms like food delivery or e-commerce — there's a tension. People appreciate speed, but they still value meaningful resolution when it matters.

So the marketer's role doesn't disappear. It evolves.

- From doing → to deciding
- From executing → to orchestrating
- From optimising campaigns → to shaping meaning

That's the real shift.

With hyper-personalisation becoming the norm, where should brands draw the line between relevance and intrusion?
This is a tricky one — because the truth is, the line is already blurred. And it's not going back.

Hyper-personalisation isn't new. We've seen versions of it for years — whether in political campaigns or platform algorithms. Today, it's just become more visible, more precise, and more constant.

If you open something like Instagram, the feed you see is completely different from the person sitting next to you — even in the same household. Not just the content, but even the comments, the tone, the narratives — it's all personalised.

So the idea that brands can simply

If a brand can personalise while still feeling genuine — not overly engineered, creepy or pushy — it can sustain engagement and build trust. Authenticity is everything

"choose" not to intrude is a bit idealistic. The system itself is built for it.

What's really happening is this: intrusion is becoming normalised — and consumers are adapting to it.

They know they're being targeted. They know there's data behind it. But instead of opting out, they're developing coping mechanisms — ignoring, filtering, or selectively engaging.

So where should brands draw the line?

Probably not at a technical level — because that line will keep shifting. The real line is perceived intent. If personalisation feels helpful, people accept it. If it feels manipulative or excessive, people pull back. And in a crowded, hyper-targeted environment, that perception becomes everything.

So again, it comes back to something simple but hard: *authenticity.*

If a brand can personalise while still feeling genuine — not overly engineered, not creepy, not pushy — it can sustain engagement.

If it crosses that invisible line, consumers won't protest loudly — they'll just tune out. And that's far worse.

In an ecosystem flooded with AI-generated content, what truly differentiates authentic, high-trust brand communication?

Honestly, if someone cracks this fully, they win. Because right now, we're entering a phase where content is exploding — but differentiation is collapsing.

You've probably seen it — AI-generated reels, talking vegetables, absurd formats… and then humans copying those same patterns. Everything starts to look and sound the same very quickly.

That's the real problem. Not volume — but sameness.

Formats will converge. Hooks will converge. Even tone, pacing, colour palettes — everything will start to standardise. We're already seeing it.

So if everything looks similar, what actually differentiates a brand?

The message. And the consistency of that message over time.

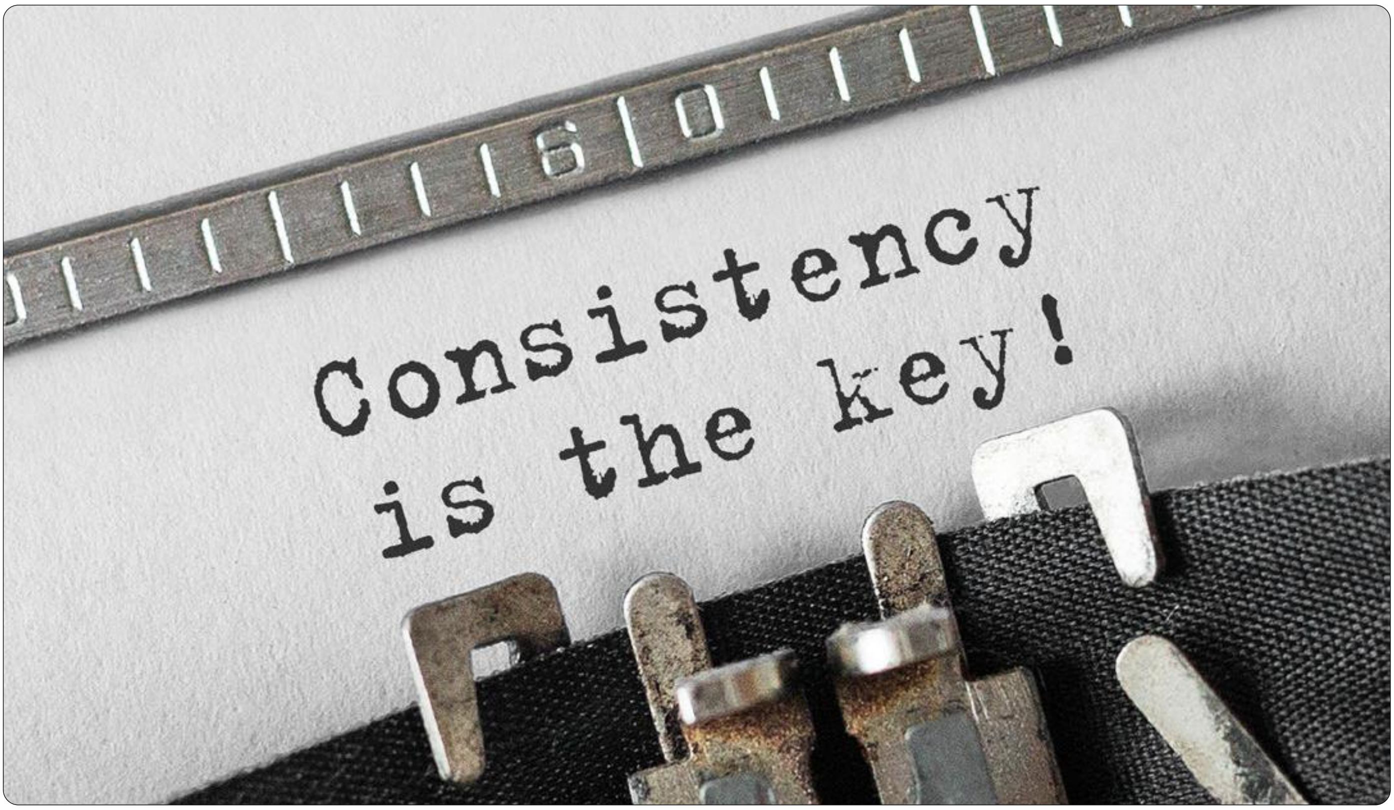
Because in a world full of AI content, consumers are not just asking *"is this good?"*

They're asking *"is this real?"*

And especially younger audiences — they don't trust easily. They process brand communication with filters already switched on.

So brands don't stand out by being louder. They stand out by being *clear and consistent.*

One way to do that is to bring in realness — actual people, actual stories.



Not just polished brand narratives, but what's happening behind the scenes:

- Customers
- Employees
- Everyday decisions

Because that's where authenticity comes from — not from perfection, but from reality. If it's just "look how great our brand is," it gets ignored. There's no signal there anymore. But if it feels grounded — if it feels like there are real people behind the brand — then it cuts through.

So in an AI-heavy world, trust won't come from better content generation. It will come from human signal in a sea of synthetic noise.

Short-form video and social commerce are dominating today's landscape. What does this shift reveal about changing consumer attention and decision-making?

Attention is clearly shrinking. We see it everywhere — even in classrooms. And it's not just anecdotal, it's structural.

Short-form content fits the way people now consume information: fast, fragmented, and continuous.

Even storytelling is adapting. You now have creators turning long narratives — sitcoms, daily stories, even episodic content — into bite-sized formats. So it's not that storytelling is dying, it's just being compressed.

But the bigger shift is in how people make decisions in this environment.

We're living in an information overload system. There's simply too much to process. So people don't analyse deeply most of the time — they rely on heuristics, mental shortcuts.

Swipe, skip, like, click — that's the default mode. And that has two implications.

First, this behaviour is only going to grow. More content, less attention, faster decisions.

But second — and this is important — there's also a counter-trend. A smaller but meaningful segment of consumers is actively seeking depth. They're curating their feeds, looking for content that actually adds value, not just noise.

So you have both happening at the same time:

- Mass behaviour → short-form, heuristic-driven, quick decisions
- Niche behaviour → long-form, deliberate, value-seeking

For brands, this means you can't think in binaries. You need both.

And when it comes to decision-making, the fundamentals haven't changed as much as we think.

High-involvement products? People will still take time. Low-involvement

As AI-generated content makes everything look the same, what will differentiate a brand? Consistency of messaging over time — and still feeling real

products? Impulse buying will still happen — especially through social commerce.

What short-form content really does well is trigger the journey. It gets attention, creates curiosity, and pushes the first action — even for higher-value decisions.

After that, the deeper journey still plays out.

As search evolves into AI-driven answer engines (AEO/GEO), how should marketers rethink visibility and content strategy?
There's a lot of noise around this — SEO vs AEO vs GEO — but honestly, the fundamentals haven't changed as much as people think.

Earlier, it was about keywords. It still is. The difference is in how those keywords are structured. Instead of just fragments, you now have to think in questions, phrases, and intent-driven queries — the way people actually ask things.

Yes, right now, you can probably "game" some of these systems by anticipating exact questions and structuring content around them. But that's short-term thinking.

For long-term visibility, the rules are still the same: create relevant, well-researched, high-quality content around what matters to your brand. If your content genuinely addresses what users are searching for, it will surface — whether through traditional search or AI-driven answers.

What changes is the format layer. It's no longer just about webpages. It's about:

- Text
- Video
- Captions
- Metadata
- Context around the content

All of these contribute to how discoverable you are.

So yes, you still need to embed the right keywords — but not in a forced way. It has to be natural, because that's how the content is meant to be consumed.

So the shift is not from SEO to something completely new. It's from keyword optimisation to intent understanding.

And if you get that right, you'll remain visible — no matter how the interface changes.

With consumers facing information overload, how can brands design content that aligns with how people actually process and filter information?
This actually connects to a lot of what we've already discussed. People are overloaded. There's too much content, too many messages, too many brands competing for the same attention. So consumers don't process everything — they filter aggressively.

Which means brands don't win by producing more content. They win by producing the right kind of content.

And again, it comes back to authenticity. If something feels real and genuinely useful, it stands a better chance of getting through the filter. If it feels forced or overly sales-driven, it gets ignored almost instantly.

But there's also a strategic layer to this. Brands need to move away from one-dimensional content and think in terms of content systems. Not every piece of content has to do the same job.

You might have:

- Content that educates
- Content that drives reach
- Content that's designed to go viral
- Content that builds depth and trust

And all of this needs to work together. Because today, every brand is essentially a content creator. That's no longer optional.

At the same time, consumers are not uniform. While most operate on quick filters and heuristics, a smaller segment

> **We're living in an information overload system where swipe, skip, like and click have become the default mode. Yet a meaningful segment of consumers is still seeking depth**

is actively looking for depth. They want content that adds value, not just fills time.

So the real challenge is balance. Stand out — but don't feel out of place. Follow trends — but don't lose your voice. If a brand can do that, and consistently show up with content that feels useful rather than pushy, it builds recall. And over time, that recall turns into trust — and eventually, into action.

Data is abundant, but insight is scarce. How can marketers balance data-driven decision-making with human intuition and creativity?
A lot of marketing today is already data-driven — and it's only going to become more so.

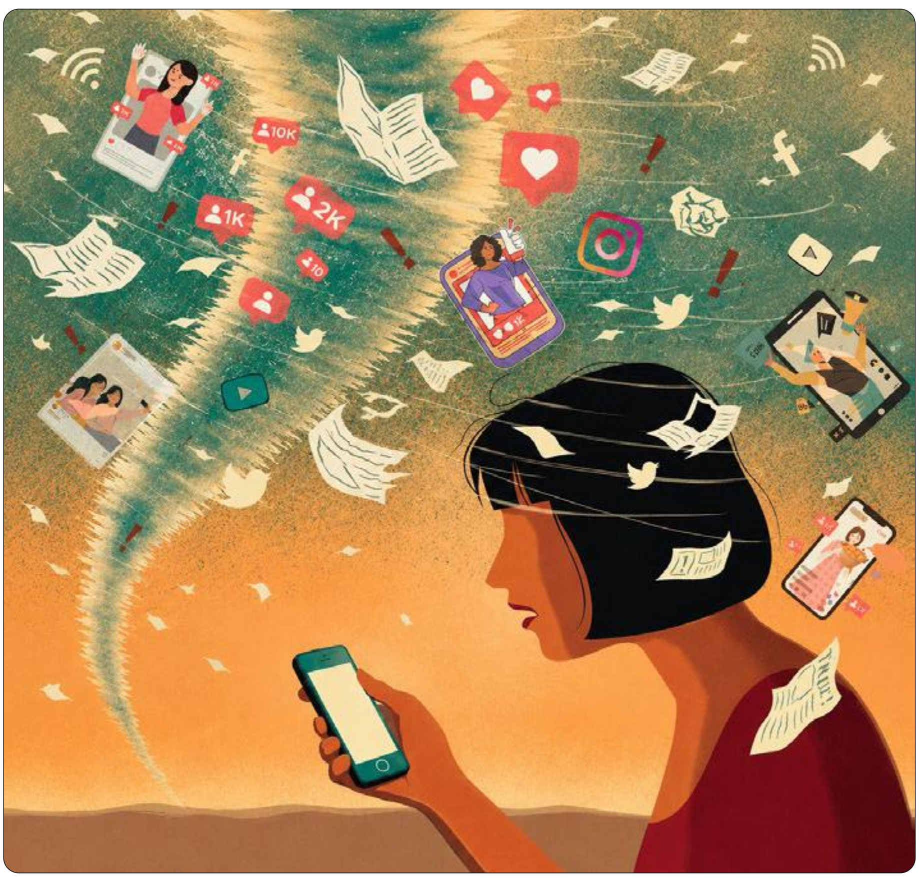
Things like media buying, bid optimisation, budget allocation — most of this will be automated through agentic systems. Data will drive execution at a level and speed that humans simply can't match.

But that's not where the differentiation will come from. Because access to data — and even the ability to analyse it — is getting democratised very quickly. Tools are becoming easier, faster, and more accessible.

So the real question is not *"can you analyse data?"*

It's *"what questions are you asking of the data?"*

> **Consumers don't process everything anymore — they filter aggressively. Brands won't win by producing more content, but by producing the right kind of content**



That's where marketers come in.

One principle that has always held true — and will become even more important — is: segment, segment, segment.

Not just broad demographics, but micro-segments. Who are they? How are they behaving? What matters to them? And more importantly — what are their aspirations?

Because if you stay only at the demographic level, you'll miss the real signal. The deeper insights come from behavioural and psychographic understanding.

That's where intuition plays a role.

Data can tell you what is happening. It doesn't always tell you why. That "why" often comes from human judgement, pattern recognition, and experience.

And then comes creativity.

In a world where execution is standardised, creativity becomes a multiplier. Not just in content, but in:

- the questions you ask
- the problems you choose to solve
- the way you frame insights

So the balance isn't between data *versus* intuition. It's about using data as the base —and layering it with judgement, curiosity, and creative thinking.

That's what turns data into insight.

In emerging markets like India, how critical are vernacular content, community-led growth, and mobile-first strategies in building digital success?
Short answer — they're not optional, they're fundamental.

India is not one market. It's multiple layers of culture, language, and context. So if a brand is only communicating in one language or one tone, it's automatically limiting its reach.

Vernacular content is powerful because people naturally engage more deeply in their own language. It reduces friction. It builds familiarity. And over time, it builds trust.

Then comes community.

This is probably one of the most important levers going forward. The strongest brands today are not just broadcasting — they're building communities. Spaces where people interact, share, and feel a sense of belonging around the brand.

And that does two things:

- It strengthens authenticity
- It creates organic growth loops

Which is far more powerful than just paid reach.

And finally — mobile-first.

In India, mobile is not just a channel — it's the primary interface with the internet. If you're not designing mobile-first, you're already behind

In India, mobile is not just a channel — it's the primary interface with the internet. For a large part of the population, the entire digital experience is mobile-led.

So if your content, platform experience, or communication is not designed for mobile first, you're already behind.

Put all three together — vernacular, community, mobile — and you're essentially aligning with how India actually consumes and engages.

Miss these, and you're designing for a market that doesn't exist.

Looking ahead to the next decade, what capabilities will truly differentiate successful marketers in an AI-driven world?

At a high level, it comes down to a few things — but they're not what people usually expect.

First — *creativity.*

In a world where content generation is easy and abundant, creativity becomes the real differentiator. Not just in what you create, but in how you think, what questions you ask, and how you frame problems.

Second — *social skills and empathy.*

The ability to understand people — what they feel, what they want, what they don't say directly — becomes incredibly valuable. Because while AI can process data, understanding human nuance still requires human judgement.

Third — *adaptability.*

The world is changing fast — technology, geopolitics, climate, consumer behaviour. Marketers who can adapt quickly, learn fast, and stay relevant will have a clear edge.

And then there's something people don't talk about enough — *decision-making under pressure.*

Because brands are going to be tested more frequently. External shocks, internal crises, shifting narratives — these are going to be constant.

So the question is:

- Can you stay calm?
- Can you process information quickly?
- Can you make the right call at the right time?

That's where real differentiation will show up.

Also, with so much automation, even decision fatigue becomes real — not just for consumers, but for marketers as well. So clarity of thinking becomes a skill in itself.

And finally — let's be honest — most technical skills are becoming easier to acquire. AI tools, platforms, analytics — anyone can pick them up quickly.

So they won't differentiate you.

What will differentiate you is how you *think, decide, and understand people.*

That doesn't get automated easily.

Gen Z Doesn't Buy Products
They Buy Belief

For Gen Z, purchases are no longer driven by aspiration alone. Brands must now prove their values, ethics and authenticity before earning trust

Jagrit Varindani

I worked at HSBC, and one question that comes to mind is: when was the last time anyone saw any Gen Z consumers in a long queue outside a bank or an ATM? That is not because Gen Z does not need financial services, but because, for Gen Z, a branch is not where their relationship with money starts.

During my tenure at HSBC, I saw a shift in the infrastructure of banking, a shift that was not just technical but also behavioural. Younger generations are not just opening accounts to save; they are opening wallets for a sense of belonging.

Trust Beyond Transactions

If we look at the difference, we can see that Millennials grew up in a generation where brand aspiration addressed the wants and needs of individuals.

> **Gen Z is the most brand-aware generation and the one that trusts brands the least. They check everything first — the brand's story, values and social impact**

Millennials make and own their purchases with the trust that brands will serve them well. But for Gen Z, the story is a little different. The generation known for having opinions on almost everything is also the most brand-aware and the one that trusts brands the least.

Gen Z checks everything about a brand first. What is the story of the brand? What does the brand stand for? Is the brand doing right by society and its shared resources? All this scepticism around brands has also made companies very conscious of how they are portrayed on public forums.

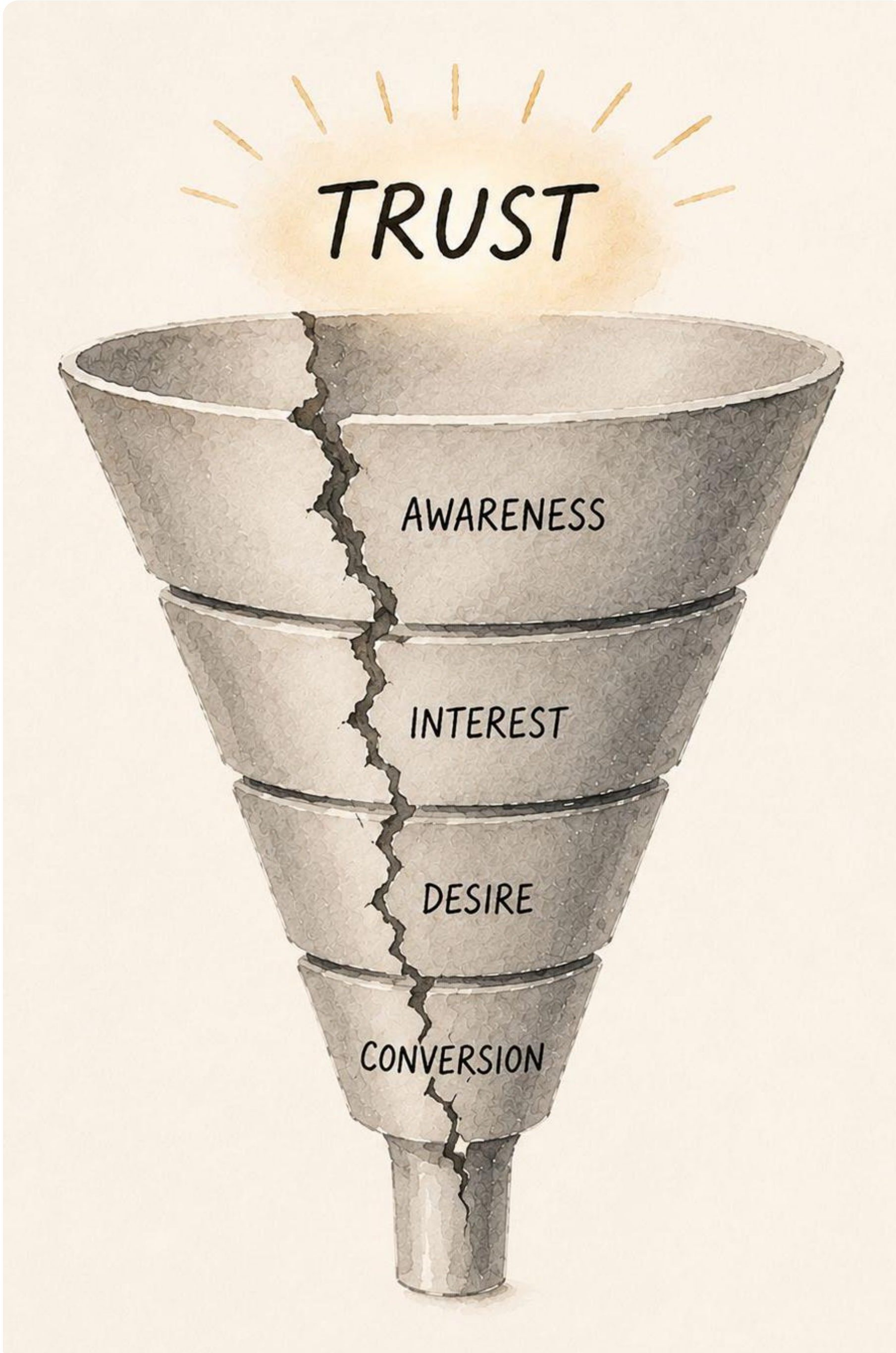
A 2022 report by McKinsey & Company, *True Gen: Generation Z and its implications for companies,* states that Gen Z is more likely than any previous generation to make purchase decisions based on a company's ethical stance, whether on climate, labour or representation. They are not just consumers. They are silent auditors.

The Internet Never Forgets

A question might arise: why is there such a difference between these two generations? The answer is that Gen Z grew up with the internet as a fact-checking tool, not merely a platform for entertainment. All it takes is a Reddit thread or an Instagram story to expose a brand that talks about sustainability while shipping products in layers of plastic wrap.

A very interesting campaign that comes to mind is Patagonia's, which once ran a full-page advertisement stating "Don't Buy This Jacket" — very contrary to what an advertisement usually stands for — but the purpose was to appeal to customers to think and evaluate before making a decision. That was not a marketing stunt; it was conviction. And the outcome was as expected: the

The iconic marketing funnel is not one-size-fits-all anymore. Gen Z did not just change buying habits; they changed the entire basis of trust



new generation not only noticed it, but rewarded it with loyalty and advocacy.

On the contrary, some fast-fashion labels place an "eco-collection" tag on a very small percentage of their catalogue while the majority of their product lines rely on exploitative labour or questionable practices. In today's world, the views of netizens travel faster than a PR team can draft a response.

Ownership Is No Longer Essential

Another major shift is that the newer generation is comfortable not owning material goods and paying for services instead. One classic example is Apple Music being preferred over CD collections. Thrifted fashion over a packed wardrobe.

Deloitte's 2023 Global Gen Z Survey found that the cost of living is their single biggest concern. But this is also a values statement. Ownership carries an environmental cost. Sharing signals consciousness. This shows that it is both a conscious and an economic response to a deeper concern.

The New Step in Marketing

The iconic marketing funnel — build awareness, create desire and convert — is not one-size-fits-all anymore. When we look at newer generations, one more step has been added to the journey: investigation. What is the company's story? What problem is it trying to solve? What are its values and vision? How does it treat its workers? How honest and ethical is it in its approach?

For brands, marketers and every business student thinking about consumer behaviour, the shift is not just generational. It is structural. Gen Z did not just change what they buy. They changed the entire basis on which trust is built.

And they open their wallets only when they truly feel they belong.

Jagrit Varindani
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

Bharat vs India
One Market, Two Consumers?

Diverging behaviours across urban and non-urban markets are reshaping India's consumption story — and forcing brands to rethink growth strategies

Manas Pandey

India's economic growth story is one of a kind. It is a well-documented fact that ever since the country opened its economy to global markets in 1991, there has been staggering growth in the country, as evidenced by a year-on-year rise in gross domestic product over the subsequent decades (see Figure 1).

This incredible growth in 'production' is not in isolation; a similar significant increase in 'consumption' has also taken place, marked by a rise in average monthly expenditure across households. Indians today produce and consume more than their predecessors did — a result of trade-friendly government policies, inflow of private investment, subsequent economic reforms and increasing consumer aspirations.

One measure of this 'consumption' is Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE), which is tracked by

An average rural Indian still spends less than a city-dweller, and the gap widens every year — leading to an increasingly segmented market

the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) through Household Consumption Expenditure Surveys (HCES) (see Figure 2), which further categorise it across 'urban' and 'rural' households.

Increasing Divide

Figure 2 highlights a growing divergence between urban and rural household spending in terms of absolute values. While the urban-rural difference as a percentage of rural MPCE has decreased over the years, the absolute difference has risen from ₹845 (in 1999-'00) to ₹1,502 (in 2022-'23). This indicates that while rural India is catching up with urban India in terms of monthly spending, an average rural Indian still spends less than a city-dweller, and the difference is increasing every year.

What drives this absolute gap? Growing income disparity? Impact of socio-economic factors? Increasing urban population? The answer to this question is multi-faceted and is a subject of comprehensive research and analysis. But one thing remains certain: the gap is increasing, and this is leading to the formation of an increasingly segmented market.

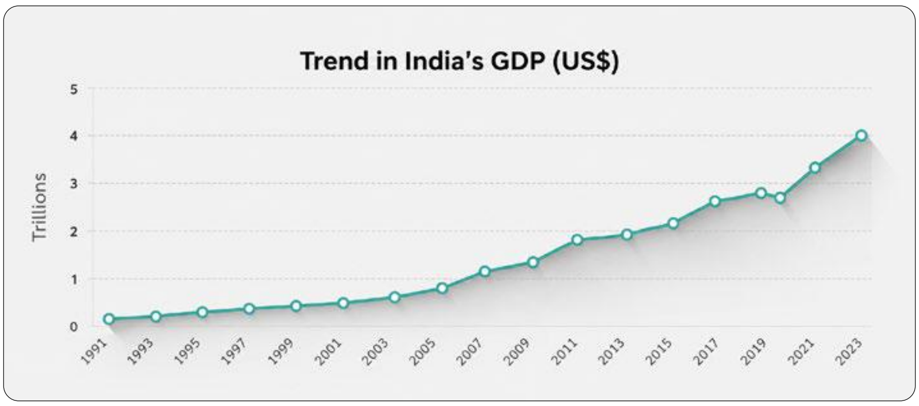


Figure 1: India's GDP (Source: World Bank Open Data)

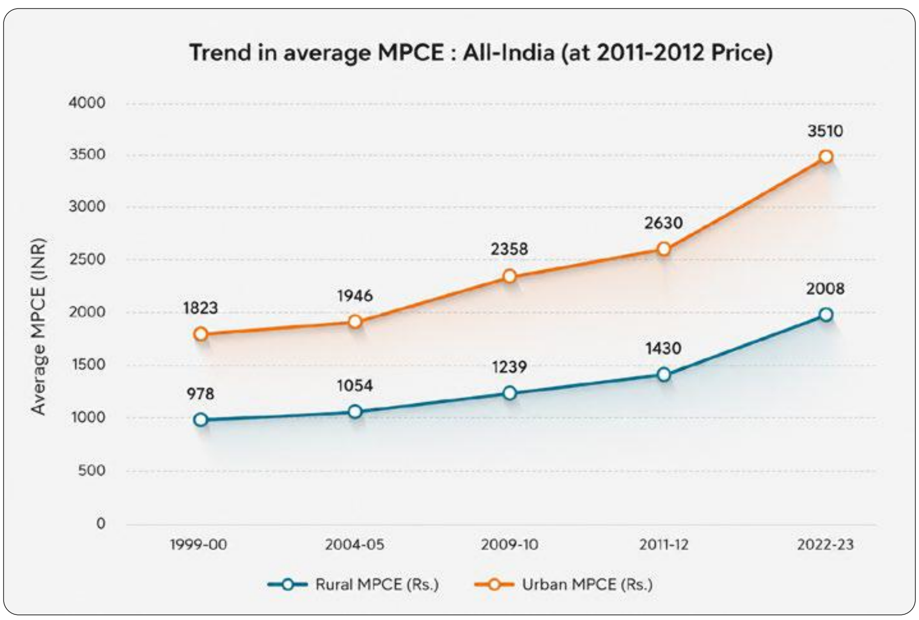


Figure 2: MPCE (Source: MoSPI HCES 2022-2023)

Emergence of Two Markets

Some estimates suggest that the rural population of India includes more than 937 million people, while the urban population accounts for almost 513 million people (Source: World Bank Open Data), which is almost half of the rural population. But even with almost double the number of people, rural India's MPCE is roughly only 60 per cent of that of urban India. This shows that urban customers are driving value, while rural customers are driving volume.

An urban customer has greater disposable income and is paying more for discretionary, premium or high-priced items than a rural customer, who buys standard, average-priced commodities and services.

What Does it Mean for Brands?

The emergence of two markets within the country should have an impact on brand strategies. Treating India as a single homogeneous market is no longer an option. There needs to be stricter segmentation practices, not to create inequality, but to recognise today's reality and adapt accordingly.

Brands can make use of this two-speed economic growth to segment sharply, to pursue both value (urban) and volume (rural) simultaneously, rather than diluting strategies to cater to a single market. Stricter segmentation ensures companies allocate resources where they yield the highest returns.

Take the example of Maruti Suzuki's dual sales channel strategy. Maruti Suzuki recognised the growing separation of rural and urban markets and created two different sales channels: NEXA (for a premium, urban positioning) and ARENA (for the mass market). There is significant difference between the strategies employed by the two channels, in terms of the SKUs/models offered, the retail experience and the perceived quality of customer service received, and this has yielded positive results.

Maruti Suzuki's dual channel strategy has contributed to sustained growth in sales and revenue, reflected in its strong stock performance over the past five years. This shows that brands need to perform a strategic trade-off: either maximise margins in urban markets, or maximise reach in rural India, or build parallel capabilities to do both to stay competitive. Identical pricing, distribution and communication strategies will not work in an increasingly segmented market.

Parallel Paths

While a growing expenditure gap can be alarming, and efforts are being made to reduce this gap through government policies, acknowledging this growing divide is also important, and can help policy makers design differentiated schemes and policies to achieve balanced growth and to prevent rural markets from being left behind.

Treating India as a single homogeneous market is no longer an option. There needs to be stricter segmentation practices to recognise today's reality

Stricter segmentation can help in creating tailored schemes at both commercial and societal level. This should not be taken as a division of the market or the population, but rather customised solutions catering to different requirements to ensure growth for all.

India is not one market waiting to converge; it is two markets evolving in parallel. Brands that recognise this early will not just grow with India but grow because of its differences.

Manas Pandey
is a PGDM(GM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

“HR Leaders Must Think Like Product Leaders”

As AI, automation and changing workforce expectations redefine organisations, HR is rapidly evolving from an operational support function into a strategic, technology-driven business partner. In this insightful conversation, **Sumit Malhotra**, Vice President and HR Research Lead at Gartner, discusses with *Keshab Jain* how AI is reshaping workforce planning, employee experience and the role of HR leaders themselves, who must increasingly balance technology, ethics and business strategy. Drawing from his multidisciplinary experience across finance, analytics and HR research, Malhotra also explains why organisations that actively invest in reskilling and adaptability will gain a stronger competitive advantage in the future of work.

Your career journey has been quite non-linear, moving from finance into HR research and strategy. How did that transition happen?
My career journey has definitely been non-linear. I actually started at an HR consulting organisation where my primary interest was analytics rather than HR itself. Later, because of my academic background in finance, I pursued a master’s degree specialising in finance and worked in strategy roles within the financial services domain.

However, over time, I realised that what I enjoyed most was the consulting and research-oriented side of work. When I moved into Gartner — previously CEB — and started working on HR-related advisory projects, I discovered the impact that research-driven HR strategy could create for organisations.

The turning point came when I saw organisations actively implementing recommendations from research insights that we had developed. That multiplier effect — helping hundreds of organisations solve people-related challenges through research — became the biggest motivation for me to move deeper into HR strategy and advisory.

What are the most important competencies HR professionals need today?
Three qualities stand out consistently for me: communication skills, analytical ability and adaptability.

Communication is foundational because HR professionals need to influence stakeholders, build trust and effectively communicate ideas across the organisation.

Analytical ability is equally important because HR today is deeply connected with business strategy. Professionals need to understand business implications, workforce trends and organisational data to make informed decisions.

Finally, adaptability has become critical in today's environment. Technology, business models and workforce expectations are evolving constantly. HR professionals must demonstrate a growth mindset and the willingness to continuously learn and adapt to new challenges.

What major trends in HR research do you believe will shape organisations in the coming years?

One of the biggest shifts we are seeing is the growing importance of strategic workforce planning.

Historically, workforce planning was often considered a 'good-to-have' capability. However, with AI, automation and rapidly changing business environments, it is becoming a core strategic responsibility for CHROs and HR teams.

Organisations now need to constantly assess how technology, AI agents and changing workflows will impact talent requirements. HR leaders are increasingly expected to advise boards and business leaders on workforce implications of strategic decisions.

At the same time, many organisations still struggle with implementation. Building workforce plans is one challenge, but continuously updating and operationalising them requires strong collaboration between HR and business leadership.

HR leaders will increasingly need to think like product leaders – designing AI-enabled employee experiences while balancing efficiency with personalisation

How do you see AI reshaping HR functions and the employee experience?

AI is fundamentally changing how HR operates.

For the last decade, cloud-based HR systems focused heavily on standardisation and operational efficiency. However, AI is now enabling a return to deep customisation and contextualisation of employee experiences.

In the future, organisations will increasingly build HR ecosystems tailored to their specific workforce needs. For example, high-volume recruitment organisations may invest heavily in

AI-driven hiring agents, automated assessments and interview systems, while other organisations may prioritise leadership development or learning ecosystems instead.

This means HR leaders will need to think like product leaders — working closely with technology teams, designing AI-enabled employee experiences and balancing efficiency with personalisation.

How can organisations effectively measure and understand culture, which is often considered intangible?
Culture measurement cannot rely on intuition alone anymore. Organisations today have access to significantly more real-time employee sentiment data through pulse surveys, collaboration tools, sentiment analysis, and platforms such as Glassdoor or Fishbowl.

However, data alone is not enough.

The most effective organisations combine data-driven insights with active leadership involvement. Leaders who regularly interact with employees, conduct town halls and closely observe behaviours can identify whether organisational values are actually being reflected in day-to-day actions.

Culture ultimately becomes visible through employee behaviour, innovation, customer interactions and leadership decisions — not just survey scores.

Employee expectations have changed significantly after the pandemic. How do you see this evolving further?
Employee expectations evolve alongside broader business and economic cycles.

Post-pandemic, employees began prioritising flexibility, remote work, mental wellness, work-life balance and holistic well-being much more strongly than before. While some of these expectations fluctuate depending on market conditions, many of them have permanently become part of the employer-employee equation.

One important emerging expectation is organisational investment in learning and adaptability. Employees increasingly expect employers not only to provide AI tools, but also to guide them on how to learn, reskill and stay relevant in a rapidly changing work environment.

Organisations that actively invest in employee development and adaptability will likely gain a stronger competitive advantage in attracting and retaining talent.

> **Strategic workforce planning is no longer a 'good-to-have'; it is becoming a core strategic responsibility for HR leaders**

How do you see the role of HR leaders evolving in an AI-driven future?
The role of HR leaders is going to expand significantly.

CHROs will continue to remain custodians of employee experience and business performance, but they will also increasingly become technology leaders, ethics stewards and strategic advisors.

As AI becomes more integrated into workflows, HR leaders will need to address questions around AI governance, employee data ethics, workforce transformation and technology adoption strategies.

At the same time, automation of operational HR tasks creates an opportunity for HR teams to focus more deeply on strategic business partnership, leadership advisory, organisational culture and workforce transformation initiatives.


INTEGRITY
TRANSPARENCY
ETHICS
GROWTH
PROFIT
& LOSS
REVENUE
EBITDA
CASH FLOW
ASSETS
LIABILITIES
ROI
MARKET
SHARE
TRU
ACCOUNTA
FAIRNESS
STAKEHOLDER WELFARE

THE MORAL COMPASS of Leadership

Hard numbers often collide with human realities. In those moments, emotional intelligence guides leaders to ethical decisions that balance business sense with empathy, fairness and human understanding

Vanshika Misra

Picture this: a CEO sits in a boardroom, staring at numbers that tell a harsh story. The company needs to cut costs to stay afloat, and the board is pushing for immediate layoffs. In such a situation, what separates a good leader from a great one is how they handle this moment: not just crunching numbers, but understanding the human impact and making decisions that reflect both business sense and moral values.

This is where emotional intelligence becomes crucial. In today's business world, leaders need to make decisions that consider people's feelings, build trust and create environments where everyone can thrive. Here, emotional intelligence is the key. It plays a pivotal role, acting like a moral compass, helping leaders navigate tough situations while staying true to their values.

Understanding Emotional Intelligence
Emotional intelligence, or EI, is the ability to recognise and manage your own emotions while understanding how others feel. It includes self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, motivation and social skills. These components help leaders make better decisions by considering both facts and feelings.

Research shows that emotionally intelligent leaders are more successful than those who rely only on technical skills. They create stronger teams, handle conflicts better and inspire people to do their best work.

How EI Shapes Ethical Decisions
Self-awareness prevents bias: Leaders with high EI recognise their own biases and emotional triggers, helping them make more objective decisions. For example, if a leader knows they favour certain team members, they can consciously work to treat everyone fairly.

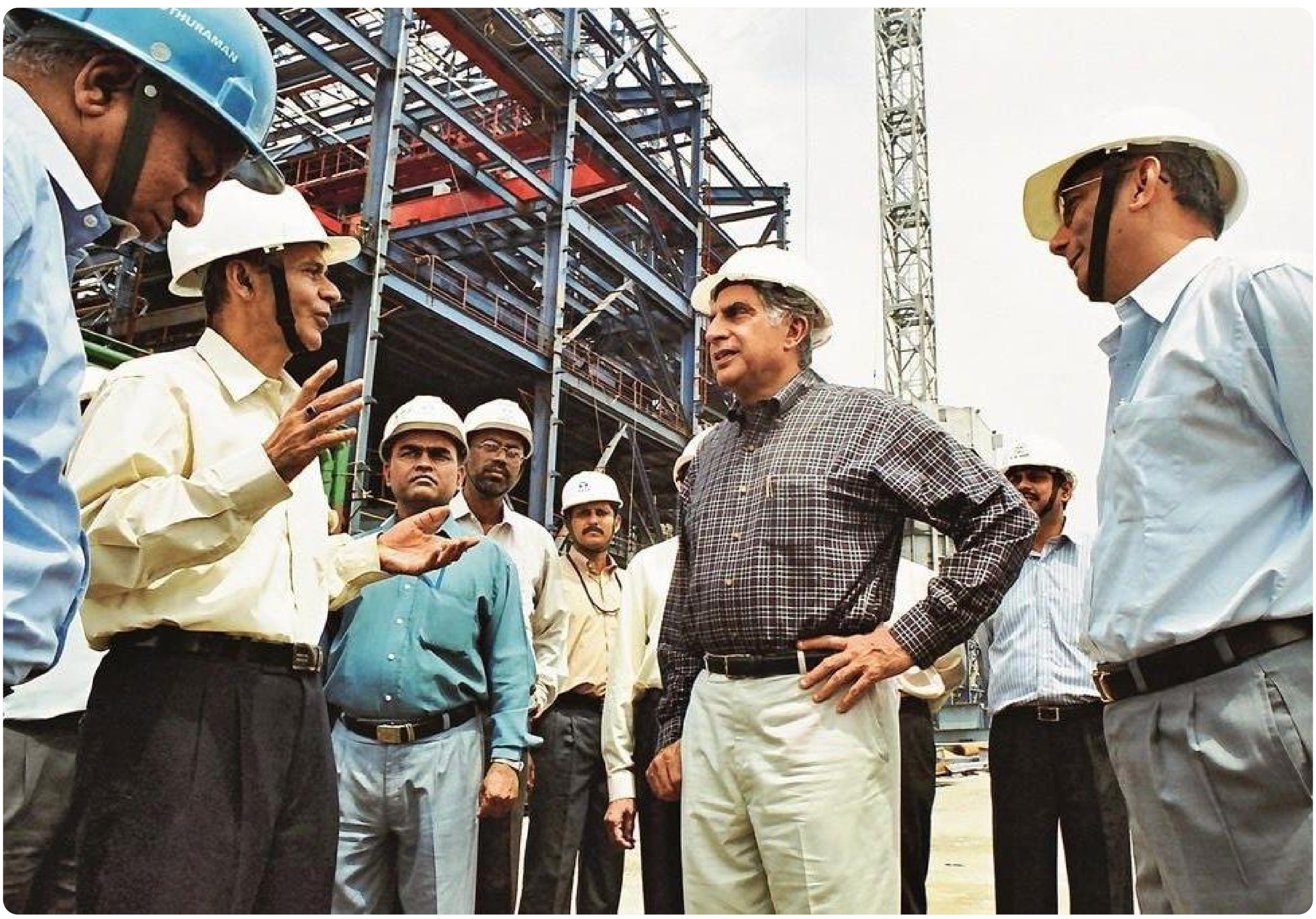
Self-regulation ensures thoughtful responses: Great leaders do not make decisions when angry or stressed. EI helps them stay calm under pressure and think through options carefully, preventing rash decisions that could harm the organisation.

Empathy considers human impact: Leaders with high empathy do not just think about profits; they consider how choices affect employees, customers and communities. For instance, when making tough decisions like layoffs, they might explore alternatives such as executive pay cuts, retraining programmes or phased reductions that give people time to find new jobs.

Building Trust and Managing Pressure
Trust is the foundation of ethical leadership. When leaders show genuine care and make transparent decisions, they build strong and lasting relationships. Emotionally intelligent leaders create psychological safety: environments where people feel comfortable expressing thoughts without fear.

These leaders also manage stress in healthy ways, maintaining ethical

What separates a good leader from a great one is not just crunching numbers, but understanding the human impact of decisions



Ratan Tata's leadership was often marked by close engagement with employees and workers

standards even in difficult times. They do not take frustrations out on teams or make desperate decisions that compromise values.

Real-World Impact

Consider Howard Schultz of Starbucks, who consistently put employees first by offering healthcare benefits to part-time workers. During the Covid-19 pandemic, Airbnb CEO Brian Chesky was widely praised for handling layoffs with unusual transparency and compassion, offering generous severance, healthcare support, and career assistance to affected employees. Likewise, Ratan Tata was widely respected for humane leadership and prioritising trust and ethics during crises, including support for employees and victims after the 26/11 attacks at the Taj Hotel. These examples show how emotional intelligence guides ethical decision-making.

Organisations with ethical leaders experience lower turnover, higher productivity and better financial performance. They attract top talent and build customer relationships based on trust that can last for generations.

Emotionally intelligent leaders create psychological safety: environments where people feel comfortable expressing thoughts without fear

Leading with Humanity

Emotional intelligence is not just a nice-to-have skill; it is essential for ethical leadership. It helps leaders understand themselves and others, make thoughtful decisions under pressure and build organisations based on trust and respect.

True leadership is about bringing your full humanity to difficult situations and choosing what is right, even when it is hard. When leaders combine understanding people with strong ethical principles, they create the kind of leadership that our world desperately needs.

Vanshika Misra
is a first-year PGDM(BM) student at XLRI Jamshedpur

When the **Ground** Won't **STAY STILL**

In Mumbai, the Xplore Roundtable focused on a reality that leaders now navigate every day: decisions are made within a moving backdrop. External shifts enter the room without notice and begin to shape priorities, timelines, and commitments. Across industries, the discussions explored how leadership holds direction when the environment continues to change around it.






Work no longer unfolds within stable conditions. Signals arrive from multiple directions, each carrying implications for choices that follow. Over time, organisations develop ways to read these signals, to move with awareness, and to maintain steadiness within their teams. The conversations examined how this steadiness is built, how learning is retained, and how judgment strengthens through repeated exposure to change.

Reading Movement Without Losing Direction
External signals now sit close to every decision. Leaders reflected on how they identify what carries weight and how they respond with clarity. Decision speed adjusts with context, and communication keeps teams aligned as conditions evolve. The emphasis remains on maintaining direction while allowing room for thoughtful response, so choices reflect both awareness and intent.

What Stays After the Shock Passes
Disruptions arrive with frequency, and each one brings lessons that shape the next response. Participants discussed how organisations build continuity through patterns that hold across cycles. Habits, preparation, and shared understanding create readiness that carries forward, allowing teams to move with composure as conditions shift again.

Careers Built on Moving Ground
Career journeys now take shape within changing cycles. Leaders shared how they recognise readiness when paths vary and roles evolve. Signals such as learning agility, range of experience, and judgment stand out as indicators of growth. Over time, individuals build momentum through how they respond to change, shaping credibility that travels across roles and contexts.











Attendees:
Abhilash Sridharan, McKinsey & Company; **Animesh Raizada**, Spark Private Wealth Management; **Anurupa Dasgupta**, L.E.K. Consulting; **Ashish Jain**, Nayara Energy; **B Gop Kumar**, Axis Mutual Fund; **Deval Shah**, Reliance Brands Limited; **Ganesh Ramachandran**, Ingram Micro; **Gunjan Srivastava**, MIRC Electronics; **Dr. Kavindra Pant**, Shapoorji Pallonji Energy; **Mohit J Kumar**, Hindalco Industries Limited; **Ravi Kumar**, Exide Industries; **Sambasivan G**, Tata Play; **Shobha Swarup**, Solenis; **Dr. Vivek Jain**, BSE

Choosing for the Future While Hiring in the Present

Hiring decisions now anticipate movement from the outset. Leaders reflected on how they identify individuals who bring clarity, adaptability, and consistency in their approach. Teams welcome people who learn quickly, interpret situations with care, and contribute with urpose as plans evolve. Over time, these choices shape organisations that move with strength even as conditions continue to shift.

The Mumbai Roundtable highlighted how leadership develops through engagement with change. Decisions, careers, and teams evolve within environments that continue to move. When leaders bring clarity to their choices and continuity to their actions, they create organisations that carry direction with them, even as the ground continues to shift.

“Make AI Your Companion, Not Your Fear”

As generative AI reshapes industries at unprecedented speed, enterprises are grappling not only with adoption, but also with governance, trust and measurable business value. Speaking with *Nandita Gaur* from XLRI, **Murari Ramuka** — an AI Technology Strategist at Microsoft who has also worked with Google, and brings over two decades of experience across data engineering, cloud transformation and AI — explains how generative AI democratised access to artificial intelligence, why responsible AI has become a foundational enterprise requirement, and why continuous learning is now essential for long-term career growth.

Having worked across multiple phases of the data ecosystem, how have you seen data trends evolve over the years?
When I began my career, the focus was largely on ETL (extract, transform, load), data warehousing and reporting systems. Organisations were primarily trying to consolidate transactional data and generate business insights through analytics.

Over time, the volume and variety of data increased significantly, leading to the rise of big data technologies. Businesses started handling unstructured and high-velocity data, which required entirely new processing frameworks.

Later, cloud computing transformed the industry by introducing scalable, pay-as-you-go infrastructure models. Instead of investing heavily in on-premise systems, organisations could now leverage cloud platforms more efficiently.

Today, we are in the era of AI and generative AI, where data is not just stored or analysed — it is actively powering intelligent systems and decision-making processes. The pace of innovation has become extremely fast, and professionals need to constantly adapt to stay relevant.

Generative AI has become one of the most transformative technologies today. What do you think changed so dramatically in this space?
Artificial intelligence itself is not new. AI models and recommendation systems existed long before generative AI became mainstream. The real shift happened when AI became accessible to everyone, not just

data scientists or technical experts.

Generative AI brought conversational interfaces and simplified user interaction with AI systems. Users could simply describe their problems in natural language and receive responses instantly. That accessibility completely changed adoption levels.

A major technological breakthrough behind this transformation was the development of transformer architectures, particularly the concept introduced through the paper "Attention Is All You Need." These models improved contextual understanding significantly, enabling systems to generate more meaningful and human-like outputs.

Since then, large language models have evolved rapidly, improving in areas such as multimodality, contextual memory and response quality. However, building these models requires massive amounts of data, compute power and investment, which is why only a few organisations operate at that scale today.

Enterprises are investing heavily in generative AI, but many organisations still struggle to move from proof-of-concepts to production deployment. Why is that?
The transition from proof-of-concept to production is challenging because enterprises are looking beyond innovation — they are evaluating business value, security and governance.

One major concern is ROI. Many organisations implemented AI quickly due to market pressure, but not every use case delivered measurable business outcomes. Enterprises now want AI systems that solve real problems rather than simply adopting technology because it is trending.

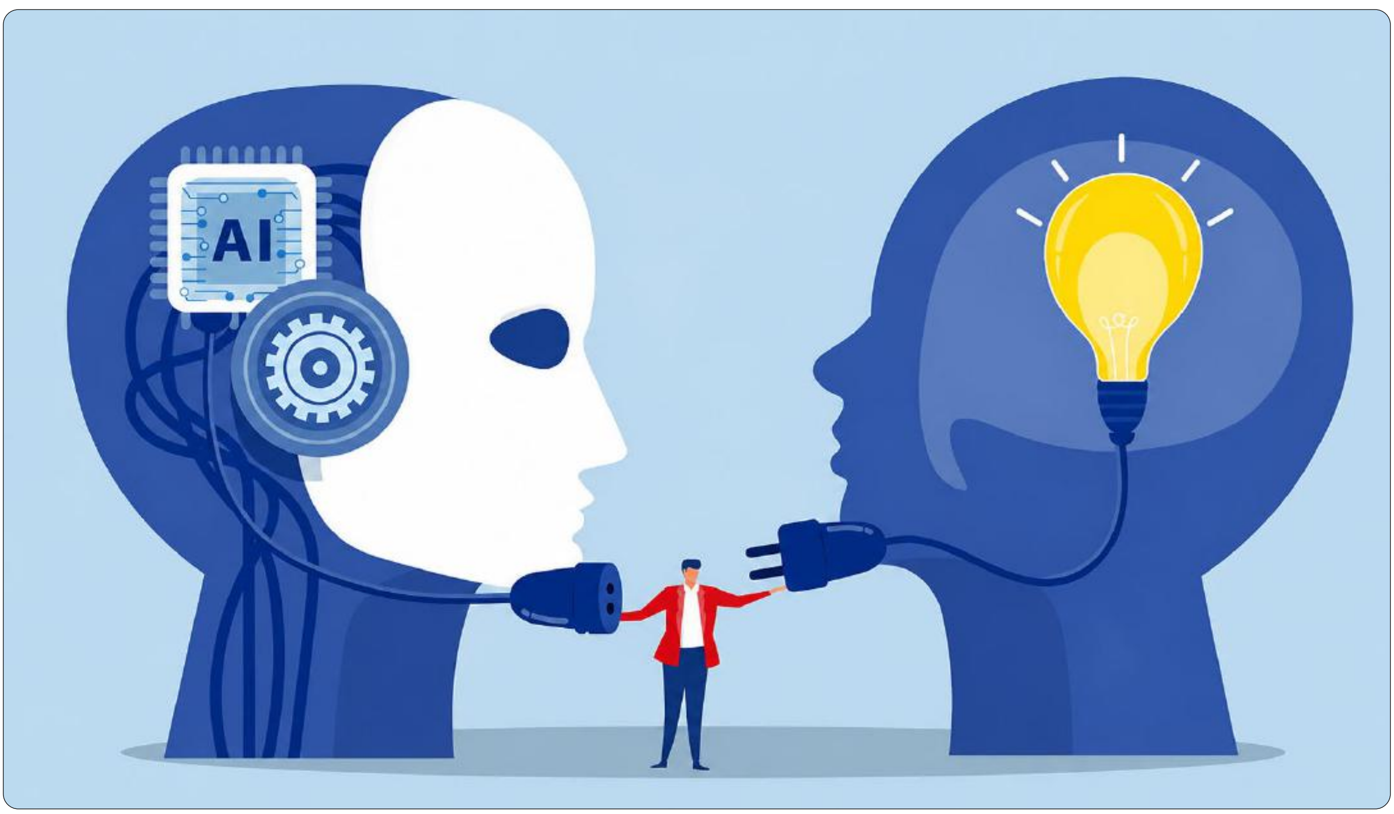
At the same time, issues such as hallucination, privacy, security and responsible AI are critical barriers. Organisations are cautious about how their data is processed and whether it could be exposed or reused unintentionally.

Production-grade AI systems require strong guardrails, governance frameworks and safety measures. Without these controls, enterprises are reluctant to deploy AI solutions at scale.

Responsible AI has become a major discussion point globally. How important is governance in enterprise AI systems?
Responsible AI is absolutely essential.

AI systems must generate grounded and reliable outputs, especially in enterprise environments where decisions can impact customers, businesses and society. Every organisation today is

Responsible AI is no longer optional – it has become a foundational requirement for deploying AI safely, reliably and effectively at enterprise scale



focusing heavily on fairness, ethics, privacy and governance frameworks.

There are also growing risks associated with misuse of AI systems, including prompt injection attacks and attempts to bypass model safeguards. As AI capabilities improve, attempts to exploit these systems are also increasing.

That is why organisations are implementing strict controls around data protection, compliance and model behaviour. Responsible AI is no longer optional — it is a foundational requirement for deploying AI safely and effectively.

There is growing concern that AI may replace jobs. What is your perspective on this?

AI will not replace people entirely, but professionals who effectively use AI will have a significant advantage.

The key is to make AI your companion rather than fear it. Whether someone is a student, developer, manager or analyst, integrating AI into daily work can improve productivity, save time and accelerate learning.

Enterprises still want humans involved in decision-making processes. AI can assist with automation, recommendations and information generation, but human judgment remains critical.

Enterprises now want AI systems that solve real business problems rather than adopting technology simply because it is trending

My advice is simple: continuously learn, experiment with AI tools regularly and stay adaptable. Those who evolve alongside technology will continue to grow in their careers.

What message would you like to leave for students and aspiring professionals entering this field?

Never stop learning.

Technology evolves extremely quickly, and comfort zones can limit growth. Professionals need to continuously upskill themselves based on changing industry demands.

One habit I personally follow is spending time every day exploring new trends and developments in technology. Even small, consistent learning efforts can create a significant long-term impact.

In today's world, adaptability and curiosity are among the most valuable professional skills anyone can develop.

The Sound of Silence
When Your Best People Stop Speaking Up

The most telling workplace warning signs are rarely loud. When talented employees stop speaking up, organisations lose far more than ideas

Andrea Watkins

It rarely begins with resignation. There is no dramatic exit, no conflict, no visible breakdown. The high performer still shows up on time, delivers what is asked and attends every meeting. On paper, nothing has changed. And yet, something has.

They stop volunteering ideas. They hesitate before speaking. They withdraw, not from work, but from participation. The hand that once went up instinctively now stays still.

This is not disengagement in its loudest form. It is something far more dangerous: *silence*.

The Loud Signals We Notice and the Quiet Ones We Miss

Organisations are trained to track what is visible. Attrition rates, engagement scores and performance metrics are the dashboards that guide managerial attention. When people leave, alarms go off. When productivity drops, interventions follow.

But silence does not show up on dashboards. It exists in pauses, in meetings where the same few voices dominate, in ideas that are never voiced. It is subtle enough to be ignored and common enough to be normalised. And that is precisely what makes it dangerous.

When Speaking Up Stops Feeling Safe

At the heart of silence lies a simple question: *Is it safe to speak?*

Not safe in the physical sense, but psychologically. The concept of psychological safety — the belief that one can speak up without fear of embarrassment or retribution — is often discussed, but rarely operationalised.

When ideas are dismissed too quickly, when dissent is subtly discouraged or when hierarchy outweighs dialogue, employees begin to recalibrate. They learn what is acceptable to say and, more importantly, what is not. Over time, silence becomes a rational choice.

The Cost of Silence

The first casualty of silence is not productivity — it is perspective.

Organisations lose dissenting views, early warnings and creative alternatives. *Decisions become smoother, but not necessarily better*. Meetings become efficient, but not insightful.

History offers enough reminders. From corporate missteps to large-scale failures, many crises were preceded by voices that were never heard or never expressed. Silence does not prevent mistakes. It allows them to grow unnoticed.

A disquieting illustration of this can be seen in the case of Boeing's 737 MAX crisis, where it was later revealed that internal concerns around safety were known but not escalated or adequately heard. Engineers and employees hesitated within a system where questioning carried invisible costs. What followed was not just a technical failure, but a cultural one where silence, not ignorance, proved catastrophic. In its aftermath, Boeing was compelled to reckon not only with engineering lapses but with a more disquieting question: had it built an organisation where its people felt safe enough to speak when it mattered most?

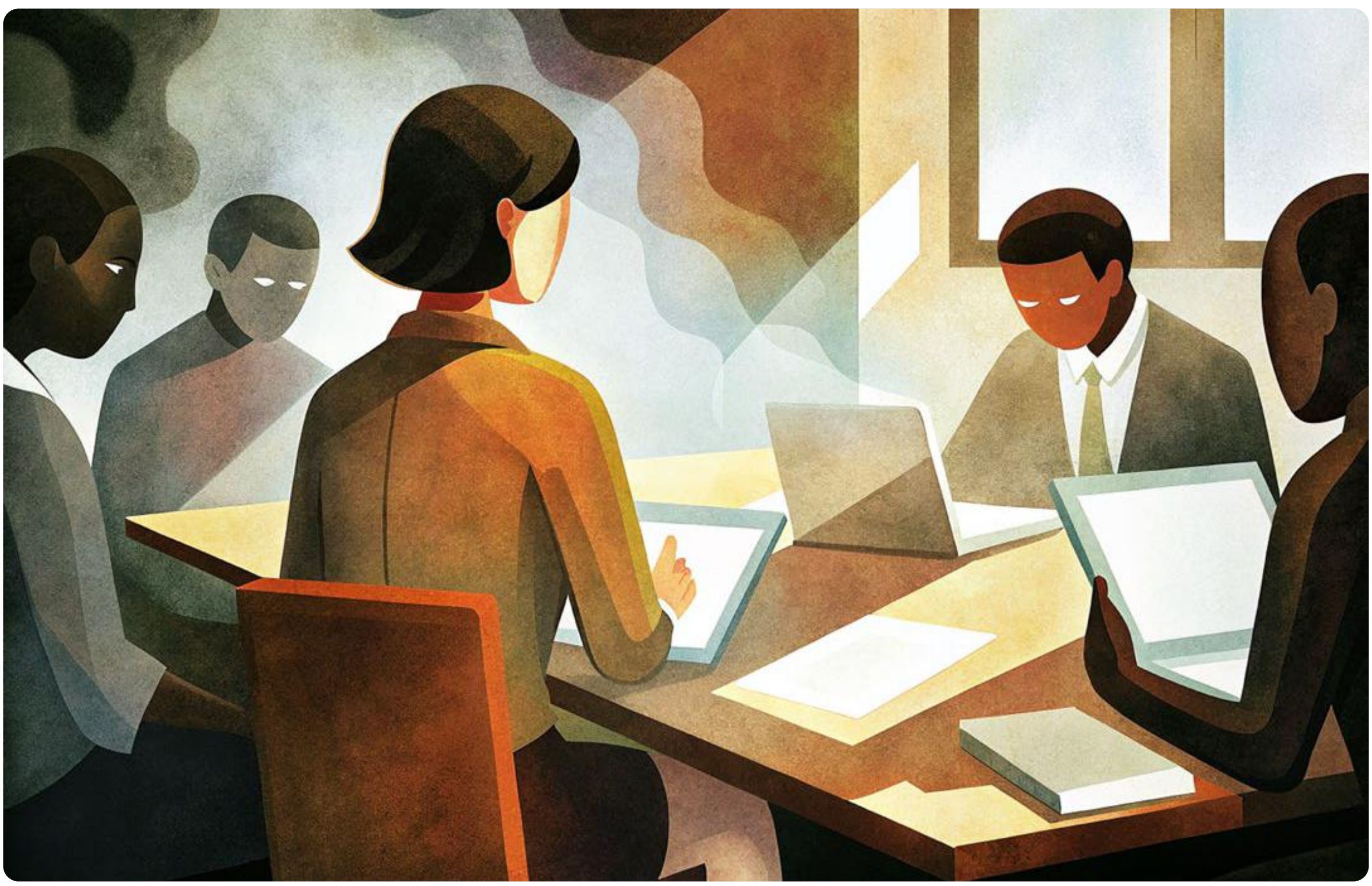
The high performer still shows up on time and delivers what is asked. And yet, something has changed: they stop participating

How Silence Is Manufactured

Silence is rarely imposed. In fact, it is cultivated — often unintentionally.

A leader who interrupts frequently, a culture that rewards agreement over inquiry, or a system that penalises failure more than it values initiative — all of these send signals. Over time, employees internalise these signals and adjust their behaviour accordingly.

What begins as a few cautious pauses can evolve into a culture of quiet compliance.



The tragedy is that by the time silence becomes visible, it is already deeply embedded.

The Inner Shift

For high performers, the shift is particularly profound.

These are individuals who once derived identity from contribution, from being heard, from shaping outcomes. When they begin to feel that their voice carries little weight, the withdrawal is not just behavioural, but psychological.

They stop investing emotionally. They do what is required, but not what is possible.

Rebuilding Voice

Reversing silence is not about asking people to speak up. It is about giving them a reason to.

Leadership, in this context, is exercised not through grand gestures, but through everyday behaviour: by acknowledging dissent without defensiveness and rewarding thoughtfulness, even when it challenges the status quo.

Some organisations have recognised this dynamic early and responded with intent. Google's Project Aristotle, an internal study on team effectiveness, showed that the strongest teams were not those with the most talented individuals, but those where people felt safe enough to speak up without fear. The insight was simple but profound: performance followed participation. By consciously fostering environments where questioning was encouraged and dissent normalised, Google demonstrated that voice is not merely a cultural ideal, but a strategic advantage.

> **The first casualty of silence is not productivity — it is perspective. Decisions become smoother, but not necessarily better**

Voice is not demanded. It is permitted.

And when that permission is genuine, it transforms not just conversations, but cultures.

The Silence That Speaks the Loudest

In the end, the most telling indicator of an organisation's health is not how loudly people speak, but whether they feel the need to.

Because when your best people stop raising their hand, they are not just withdrawing from the conversation. They are quietly stepping away from the organisation itself, long before they ever leave.

And by the time silence is heard, it is often too late.

Andrea Watkins
is first-year PGDBM student at XLRI Jamshedpur

“Consulting Is As Much About Influencing Change”

Generative AI is transforming consulting at unprecedented speed, with much of the traditional “grunt work” now being automated, says **Akhilesh Sahu**, Managing Director at Alvarez & Marsal. With nearly two decades of experience across consulting and transformation roles at Boston Consulting Group, Accenture and now Alvarez & Marsal, Sahu speaks with *Vishal Achari* about how AI is pushing consultants towards higher-value strategic roles, why influencing stakeholders matters as much as analytical rigour, and why he believes charging time — more than infrastructure or range — remains the biggest hurdle to EV adoption in India.

What drew you towards strategic consulting, and what has kept you in the profession for nearly two decades?
Interestingly, consulting was not something I initially planned to pursue. I avoided consulting during campus placements, but later entered the field through Accenture Strategy, moved to BCG, and then joined Alvarez & Marsal.

What has kept me in consulting is the constant “newness” of the job. Every few months, you work on a different sector, a new business challenge, or a fresh strategic problem. The dynamic nature of the profession prevents it from becoming repetitive.

Consulting also demands continuous growth. Every few years, expectations evolve significantly, forcing professionals to constantly stay ahead of industry trends and sharpen their problem-solving abilities. If you enjoy learning, adapting, and operating at the cutting edge, consulting can be an incredibly rewarding profession.

How has your approach to problem-solving evolved over the years?
The fundamentals of problem-solving remain the same: gathering data, building hypotheses, validating insights, and structuring solutions logically.

What has changed significantly is the availability of tools, especially with the rise of generative AI. Tasks that previously required extensive manual effort can now be completed much faster using AI-enabled systems.

However, one aspect I have increasingly

focused on over the years is the emotional side of consulting. Solving a problem alone is not enough. The real challenge lies in framing solutions in a way that stakeholders can understand, accept, and implement effectively.

Consulting is as much about influencing change as it is about analytical rigour.

How do you see AI transforming the consulting industry?

AI has fundamentally changed the consulting profession, and in many ways, it has been a major advantage for the industry.

A large portion of consulting traditionally involved "grunt work" such as data gathering, analysis, research synthesis, and slide preparation. Today, generative AI tools can automate many of these processes, significantly improving speed and efficiency.

For example, preparing for a CEO meeting earlier required teams of analysts spending days researching industry trends, competitors, and financial insights. Today, tools like ChatGPT or Perplexity can synthesise much of this information in minutes.

Consulting is as much about influencing change as it is about analytical rigour

This shift allows consultants to move up the value chain and focus more on strategic thinking, interpretation, and decision-making rather than repetitive execution tasks. At the same time, AI has also increased complexity in the business environment, creating a greater need for consulting expertise to navigate ambiguity and misinformation.

You have worked extensively in the automotive sector. What major shifts do you currently see in the industry?

The automotive industry is going through one of its biggest disruptions in decades due to the transition towards electric vehicles.

Historically, major industry shifts often create opportunities for new players because established incumbents are slower to adapt. We saw this happen in industries such as LED lighting and water purification, where entirely new companies emerged as market leaders during periods of technological disruption.

A similar trend is visible in automotive today. Companies like Tesla, BYD, Ola, and Ather disrupted markets by moving aggressively into EVs while many traditional manufacturers initially responded cautiously.

However, incumbent players are now catching up rapidly due to their scale, resources, and manufacturing capabilities. As a result, the automotive landscape is becoming far more competitive and dynamic than before.

What are your views on the growth of SUVs and premiumisation in the Indian automotive market?

The shift towards SUVs is not simply because customers suddenly prefer premium vehicles. In many ways, small cars became unaffordable due to taxation structures and rising prices.

Earlier, entry-level cars were significantly cheaper and accessible to a larger section of consumers. Today, the starting price point itself has increased considerably, making smaller vehicles less attainable for first-time buyers.

As a result, customers who can still afford cars are often those moving upward within the market and naturally gravitating towards SUVs and premium offerings. Government measures to improve affordability may gradually

revive segments at the lower end of the market as well.

What do you believe is the biggest challenge in scaling EV adoption in India?
Contrary to popular perception, the biggest challenge is not charging infrastructure or vehicle range — it is charging time.

Most modern EVs already offer sufficient driving range for daily use. The real consumer concern is the inconvenience of waiting hours to recharge compared with the few minutes required for refuelling conventional vehicles.

Advancements in battery and charging technology are rapidly addressing this challenge. As ultra-fast charging capabilities improve, many current infrastructure concerns may become far less significant.

At the same time, there is still a need for regulatory support to make EV charging installation easier within residential societies and apartment complexes, especially in urban India.

What major trends do you see shaping manufacturing in India?
India currently has a strong opportunity to benefit from global "China plus one" strategies, with organisations looking to diversify manufacturing bases beyond China.

Generative AI allows consultants to move up the value chain and focus more on strategic thinking rather than repetitive execution tasks

Government incentives in sectors such as semiconductors, batteries, EVs, and critical manufacturing are creating significant momentum for industrial growth.

Another major trend is the rise of digital manufacturing and Industry 4.0 and 5.0 technologies. Organisations across sectors are actively upgrading manufacturing systems through automation, digitisation, and advanced operational technologies to improve efficiency and competitiveness.

What advice would you give to students aspiring to build careers in consulting?
Stay curious.

The core of consulting lies in continuously learning new things and staying ahead of market trends. Consultants are expected to operate a few steps ahead of clients by understanding emerging industries, technologies, and business shifts before they become mainstream.

Curiosity, adaptability, and a willingness to constantly learn are among the most important qualities for anyone aspiring to succeed in consulting.

"We're moving fast—mostly through slide transitions."

"Operational challenges are temporary—personal branding is forever."

"Our work-life balance is now available in all time zones."

Twisters by **Shivam Litoria**

1 Often cited as the "most important document to ever come out of Silicon Valley," this company's 125-slide culture deck argued that as organisations grow, they should avoid adding complexity and instead focus on "talent density." This philosophy allows the company to operate without traditional policies for things like vacation or travel expenses. Name the company.

2 In the Toyota Production System, this physical cord is located above every workstation. Any employee, regardless of rank, is expected to pull it if they detect an anomaly, immediately stopping the entire assembly line to prevent the "silence" that leads to downstream defects. What is this signal cord called?

3 In the 1970s, MIT professor Thomas J Allen discovered that the frequency of communication between employees drops exponentially as the physical distance between their desks increases. Even a distance of just 30 meters makes communication almost non-existent. This "hidden" rule of the organisation, which dictates how modern collaborative offices are designed, is known as the _____ Curve. Identify the missing name.

4 In 2012, Google launched a massive study to figure out why some of its teams succeeded while others failed. They found that the most important factor wasn't the IQ of the members, but "psychological safety" — the belief that one can speak up without being shamed. They named this initiative after a famous Greek philosopher who believed the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Identify the project's namesake.

5 The 1986 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster is the most cited case study for this psychological phenomenon. It occurs when a group's desire for harmony or conformity results in an irrational decision-making outcome, as dissenting voices are ignored or silenced to maintain the peace. What is this term coined by Irving Janis?

1. Netflix 2. Andon cord (Andon) 3. The Allen Curve
4. Aristotle (Project Aristotle) 5. Groupthink

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