

# The Dehumanization of Urban Trade: A Qualitative Analysis of Q-Commerce's Impact on Traditional Micro-Entrepreneurship

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## Abstract

*The vital social role played by the 'Kirana' retail outlets faces unprecedented challenges as business approaches witness the rapid growth of digital transactions. This research paper discusses the impact of the increase in Quick Commerce on dehumanized trade practices and their subsequent effects on 'micro' entrepreneurs. While digital transactions simplify life for consumers, they simultaneously undermine the age-old social role played by 'Kirana' outlets to establish community trust through person-to-person contact and 'unofficial' credit. This research paper adopts qualitative research to probe the extent to which 'natural' relationships get severed to isolate vendors through the incredibly fast digital transaction system. It shall further analyze 'Kirana' retailers' adaptation to or absorption within the explosive increase of Q-Commerce through the change in trend exhibited by organized retail. This research paper shall critically analyze the transformation from human-resource trade to algorithmic delivery to assess the subsequent change in social dynamics at the grassroots level and determine whether the 'search for convenience' among consumers might be resulting in the systematic depletion of community cohesion.*

**Keywords:** Q-Commerce, Dehumanisation, Micro-entrepreneurs, Shifting Trends, Social Dynamics.

## Introduction

The retail environment in Indian cities is going through a whirlwind transformation in the wake of digital innovations, the expectations of consumers, and platform capitalism. During the past decade, Indian cities have experienced the meteoric rise of Quick Commerce (Q-commerce) platforms like Blinkit, Zepto, Swiggy Instamart, and Dunzo Daily, which claim to deliver groceries and essential commodities in just 10 to 20 minutes. These platforms have been possible due to the widespread use of dark stores (urban warehousing), the use of algorithms to decode consumer demands, real-time inventory management, and the massive gig economy for last-mile delivery (Mukherjee, 2022; Mehta & Kumar, 2023). The widespread acceptance of the Q-commerce model in Tier 1 cities, apart from being an innovation, also indicates the overall change in the lifestyles of citizens in these cities, with time scarcity, the rise of smartphone penetration, and the embedding of apps in everyday life (Deloitte, 2022). Due to this, the whole

retail business in the informal domain, which used to be driven by social milieus, is now being facilitated through digital platforms, which operate with efficiency and speed as their primary concern.

Contrarily to this scenario, kirana shops have been in existence for a significant period in India and make up the backbone of Indian retail sales (Reardon & Minten, 2011; Witsoe, 2019). These shops are individual retail ventures owned by families in urban India and are classical examples of micro-entrepreneurship. These retail ventures are characterized by easy entry conditions for entrepreneurship, lack of organization for labor, and are embedded in their local communities. Apart from their economic role in retail sales in India's cities, these retail shops have important sociocultural functions: extending credit (*udhaar*), personal service, flexible purchasing patterns in retail sales, and facilitating urban neighborhood spaces for their communities (Bhowmik, 2018). The resistance of these retail shops to competitive attacks in the retail market has been attributed to their trust networks, geographical proximity, and to their successful blurring of market transactions with other forms of obligation (Polanyi, 1944; Granovetter, 1985). In fact, even during earlier phases of retail modernization, such as expansion by supermarkets and organized retail chains, kiranas survived by mobilizing these relational advantages (Sengupta & Chattopadhyay, 2016).

But Q-commerce heralds a different, qualitative order of disruption. This is not only about competing on price and variety but fundamentally changing the human dimensions of commerce. It can be interpreted within the paradigm of the "dehumanization of trade". This involves the increased impersonalization, standardization, and algorithmization of trade. In the context of Q-commerce, the choice-making of consumers is guided by app interfaces, analytics, and delivery time commitments and not familiarity or trust derived from social networks in a communal context (Srnicek, 2017). The social aspect of trade in relation to kirana shops involves relational work based on memory, emotional support, and social ties at the neighborhood level. This is largely substituted in the context of Q-commerce by analytics and delivery time optimization driven by considerations of velocity and scalability. When trade is disassociated from social relations, there is a risk that trade relations become reduced to purely commercial transactions, leading to the depreciation of social capitals at the local level (Putnam, 2000; Sennett, 2012).

Despite this rapid growth of Q-commerce in India, most academic or industry-specific studies have been centered around efficient operation, convenience, optimization, or competitiveness in the market (BCG, 2021; KPMG, 2022). Most mainstream discussions have conceptualized Q-commerce as an inevitable or desired result of digital innovations, largely centered around low transaction costs, increased efficiencies, or better consumer well-being. Yet, most mainstream discussions centered around efficiencies tend to forget or disregard social, cultural, or human aspects related to transformations in retail spaces. Nonetheless, most qualitative analysis has still been overlooked, centrally centered around living experiences related to most conventional micro-entrepreneurs or most conventional "kirana" store owners situated in aspects related to economic survival or collective societal responsibilities. Additionally, little specific scholarly analysis has been conducted related to effects related to social capital or social interactions situated in most mainstream Indian cities.

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### **Purpose of the Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

The section sets the conceptual and theoretical boundaries of the study through the definition of key terms and location of research within relevant sociological and economic theories. The integrative theorization of embedded markets, platform capitalism, creative destruction, and social capital offers a framework that articulates an analytical perspective through which Q-commerce is redefining micro-entrepreneurship conventionally and reconstructing the social texture of urban retail. The framework also informs the interpretation of empirical findings by linking economic disruption to social transformation.

## **Definition of Key Concepts**

### **Quick Commerce (Q-Commerce)**

Quick Commerce, or Q-commerce, can be defined as a digital commerce model that achieves the quick delivery of goods, in some cases within ten to thirty minutes, through a digital application, dark delivery centers, algorithms that automatically manage inventory, and gig economy delivery work. In India's urban setting, companies like Blinkit, Zepto, and Instamart work in a manner that centralizes control over pricing, logistics, and customer information, and hence in turn alter the pattern of consumption in the country's urban settings in a significant manner due to stiff competition among local shops. Compared to e-commerce, in the case of Q-commerce, immediacy becomes the prime objective despite the absence of an element of local or relationship-driven interactions in retailing.

### **Micro-Entrepreneurship**

Micro-entrepreneurship can be understood to describe small business endeavors carried out and controlled by their owners, which often depend on family resources and a flexible business organization. In the case of urban Indian business practices, kirana stores can be understood to embody micro-entrepreneurship, which extends beyond economic organization and instead represents socially embedded institutions simultaneously facilitating economic and social processes through trust and familiarity. Micro-entrepreneurship is thus minutely linked with social identity and collective belonging.

### **Dehumanization of Trade**

Dehumanization of trade translates to trade transactions becoming less personal and more of a process conducted in a computer-dominated manner. This is because decision-making in retail platforms is done in a manner less dependent on human interaction. This is evident in Q-commerce in relation to substituting personalized service delivery with anonymous transactions and thereby weakening trade's embedded emotional and social aspects of kirana commerce.

### **Social Capital and Communal Cohesion**

Social capital is expressed by the networks, norms, trust, and associations of reciprocity, which enable cooperation on the community level (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). Within the urban community, the kirana shops have been social capitals when it comes to facilitating interaction, social support networks, and community trust on the community level. Communal cohesion refers to the measure of community on the aspect of strong social ties. Alterations in the retail structure, therefore, not only affect exchange but community connectedness as well.

## **Theoretical Foundations**

### **Polanyi's Embeddedness Theory**

Embeddedness, a theory by Karl Polanyi, asserts that economic action is necessarily embedded in social and cultural relations and not self-administering, as imagined in the market mechanism (Polanyi, 1944). Kirana stores are a good example of an embedded market, in which economic activity is interwoven with social duties and moral values. Q-commerce, on the other hand, is a disembedded market in which the economic act of transaction is separated from the social, and it is ruled by the logic of the platform itself.

### **Platform Capitalism**

Srnicek's theory of platform capitalism highlights that it is through dominating digital infrastructures, controlling data flows, and harnessing network effects that value is created within digital platforms (Srnicek, 2017). The Q-commerce platforms mediate between buyers and sellers by centralizing decision-making powers while offloading risks onto gig workers and local suppliers. In this perspective, the kirana stores are peripheries in a platform-dominated ecosystem and must bear the pressures of pricing, asymmetries in

consumer data, and algorithmic competition. Platform capitalism provides an explanation for the structural imbalance of power between Q-commerce firms and traditional micro-entrepreneurs.

### **Schumpeterian Creative Destruction**

“Creative destruction” is the term coined by Schumpeter to signify the innovations that undermine the existing structure of the economy, thereby making the older methods of production or organizing redundant (Schumpeter, 1942). In this context, Q-commerce could be termed as the innovation that challenges the sustainability of the conventional kirana shop. Yet, the current inquiry chooses to give a critical extension to the theory of creative destruction proposed by Schumpeter, questioning whether the nature of the destruction that occurs here is strictly creative.

### **Social Capital Theory**

The theory of social capital, described by Putnam (2000), and generally outlined by Bourdieu (1986), focuses on the importance and role played by social relations and trust in preserving the social happiness and economic resilience. Kirana shops improve both bonding social capital and bridging social capital. Thus, the disappearance and change brought about in retail shops by Q-commerce could be significant to the point that social bonding in cities could weaken.

### **Review of Literature**

M. Akila and Shahrez Khan (2025) in their paper “The rise of quick commerce and its impact on the traditional retailers” enable understanding the drivers leading to the increase in the popularity of Q-commerce in the context of urban India. The research comprehends consumer behavior and motivations with respect to factors such as delivery time, usability, and available products. It also evaluates the effect of Q-commerce platforms on sales, customer retention, and working difficulties faced by kirana stores.

Gauri Rajnekar (2023) in “Rise of Quick Commerce in India: Business Models and Infrastructure Requirements” throws light on how dark stores and logistics innovations are central to Q-commerce success. The study emphasizes infrastructure as a competitive differentiator.

Shivom Gupta in “A Study on Emergence of Quick Commerce” aims at offering a comprehensive review of the Quick Commerce ecosystem, the evolution, development, major actors, and the challenges that the retail, grocery, and e-commerce sector faces. The paper investigates the role of the consumer in the success of the Quick Commerce model.

Priya Menon (2023) in “Consumer Perceptions of Quick Commerce” published in the Journal of Retail and Consumer Services describes how immediacy, in terms of the visibility of influencers and the internet, changes consumer demand. Ease and convenience drive the trend.

Ritu Anand (2022) in “Impact of Instant Delivery Services on Retail Consumer Behavior” published in the Asian Journal of Management Research indicates that real-time tracking and digital trust are the factors that drive consumer adoption. The study notes it is changing the way people purchase goods in urban cities.

Vikram Shetty (2023) in “Adaptation Strategies of Traditional Retailers in the Age of Quick Commerce” published in Global Retail Research Review examines how the kirana stores are incorporating hybrid concepts to compete effectively, noting that technology partnerships will be critical for survival.

Ankit Sharma and Riya Verma (2022) in “Influence of Digital Marketing Strategies on Quick Commerce Startups in India” examine the method in which startups use influencers and video clips to reach their audience. The paper concludes that to definitively get the attention of the target group, one needs to focus on personalizing the content.

Abdulla Mahmood (2023) in “The Impact of E-Commerce on Traditional Brick-and-Mortar Retail” talks about how foot traffic is down because of the digital shopping platforms. He highlights that the only way for localized stores to survive is for them to go digital.

## **Q-Commerce and Urban Retail Transformation**

Quick Commerce, or Q-commerce, is a paradigm shift in the retail infrastructure in metropolitan cities. However, the prevailing literature is largely about comprehending Quick Commerce in terms of speed, convenience, and shifting consumer behavior. It mainly highlights how consuming daily products in a time-pressed urban living environment has created pressure for immediate delivery (Deloitte, 2022; KPMG, 2022). It has been discovered that people are developing a preference for immediacy over price sensitivity in urban regions with time constraints and higher levels of digital knowledge (Mehta & Kumar, 2023). This specific preference of consumers has been fully utilized by Q-commerce delivery platforms through their algorithmic forecasting of demands and real-time management systems.

In addition to consumer dynamics, research is emerging on market power, monopolies, and monopolistic practices exercised by retail business models that use platforms. Platform capitalism studies have noted that business models in which new, venture capital-financed firms capitalize on network effects, data assets, or entrepreneurial acumen have cemented price power, predatory low-pricing, and marginalization of smaller competitors (Srnicek, 2017; Zuboff, 2019). In an India-specific context, Mukherjee (2022) has contended that Q-commerce business platforms have started to influence retail markets, to which consumers, suppliers, or delivery infrastructure can be denied access.

A central controversy in this body of literature is that which pits the values of efficiency and sustainability against each other. There may be great logistical efficiency and convenience in Q-commerce, but certain questions have been raised about the long-term financial, natural, and social sustainability that this new trend in retailing embodies and promotes (Sennett, 2012; BCG, 2021). Much of this literature, however, centers largely on financial, and not social, concerns and planes.

## **Kirana Stores and Micro-Entrepreneurship**

Kirana shops have long been identified as basic units of the retail sector and micro-enterprises for Indian cities. Academic literature has addressed the important function of these shops with respect to employment creation, drawing upon home-based labor and offering jobs to unskilled workers residing in cities (Bhowmik, 2018). Being unregulated businesses, kirana shops function with little capital, flexible timing, and strong ties with market structures.

One of the most well-studied roles of kirana shops is their role in providing credit (udhaar) to consumers, especially in off-grid communities (Reardon & Minten, 2011). This helps in retaining consumers in the long run and helping them in their economic sustainability in low- and middle-class households. Moreover, kirana shops are known to be trust-based institutions in which people develop familiarity with each other (Sengupta & Chattopadhyay, 2016).

Previous discussions on retail modernization have envisioned the demise of kiranas due to the emergence of supermarkets and organized retail. On the contrary, however, empirical research shows that they have been resilient owing to spatial proximity, personalized services, and social embeddedness (Joseph et al., 2008). Recent scholarship, however, indicates that kiranas are encountering serious vulnerabilities amidst competition from digital platforms, as their margins grow thinner, footfalls decline, and they experience digital exclusion. The presence of these vulnerabilities raises long-term concerns on the sustainability of micro-entrepreneurship within platform-dominated urban markets.

## **Digital Disruption and the Dehumanization of Work and Trade**

Dehumanization is one of the most persistent arguments against work and trade in contemporary digital capitalism. According to researchers, automation and algorithmic management systems increasingly control activities both on the side of labor and the market, decreasing human agency and interaction (Sennett, 2012; Zuboff, 2019). In platform-mediated economies, decisions are driven by data analytics, performance metrics, and automated systems at the expense of human dignity and autonomy.

The retail sector has been reshaped by technological disruption to the point where trade has become an almost impersonal activity, involving the replacement of interactions between customers and vendors with interfaces and service protocols. Research on algorithmic leadership indicates an undervaluing, in terms of efficiency and speed, of relational work, such as trust and emotional experience (Srnicek, 2017). The retailing platform in India is said to fast-track the disembedding of markets and social relations, including the traditional social relation trade function performed by kirana shops (Mukherjee, 2022).

While there has been growing theoretical engagement with dehumanization, empirical research remains limited, especially on the changing experiences of small traders. The extant literature only partially captures the manner in which digital disruption is experienced in the daily lives of micro-entrepreneurs as stressful, devoid of autonomy, and erosive of identity.

### **Social Capital and Urban Community Networks**

Social capital theory highlights the roles of trust, networks, and social norms in the maintenance of community life (Putnam, 2000; Bourdieu, 1986). Community engagement and the literature on urban studies imply that the nature of interactions in the neighbourhood is shrinking as a consequence of mobility, the impact of the digital age, and the rise of individualist consumption patterns (Jacobs, 1961; Putnam, 2000). The provision of the physical environment of the neighbourhood, especially the small shop, functioned as a social space.

In the Indian urban context, kirana stores function as key nodes of social capital by helping routine interactions across socio-economic groups. This potential displacement by Q-commerce raises concerns of erosion in neighborhood ties and weakening of communal cohesion. Though studies acknowledge broader trends of social fragmentation in cities, few explicitly link these changes to transformations in retail structures.

### **Research Gap**

Although a lot has been studied concerning digital retailing, micro-entrepreneurship, and platform capitalism, there are currently two crucial research gaps being left unanswered. Firstly, there is an absence of research being carried out at a more experiential, grassroots level, with a focus on kirana shop owners being affected by Q-commerce. The second crucial research gap within existing research literature is that it remains mostly focused on economic factors and gives relatively little weight to broader social and cultural impacts of digital retailing transformation. Through filling these research gaps, the current research aims to provide a more humanized insight into Q-commerce-induced changes within urban trade, micro-entrepreneurship, and social capital within Indian cities.

### **Objectives of the Study**

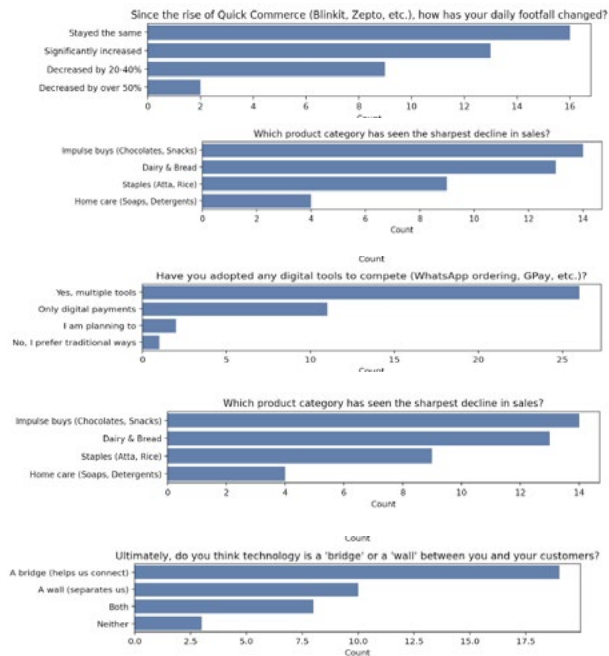
1. To Evaluate the Impact of Quick Commerce on the Socio-Economic Role of Kirana Stores
2. To Analyze the Strategies Used by Traditional Micro-Entrepreneurs to Adapt to Digital Competition
3. To Assess the Resulting Shifts in Urban Social Capital and Communal Cohesion

### **Methodology**

This study uses a cross-sectional descriptive-analytical survey design to capture kirana store owners' perceptions and self-reported experiences after the rise of Quick Commerce (Blinkit, Zepto, etc.).

### **Data Analysis & Findings**

Footfall, reasons for switching, and reasons for not switching reveal the importance of convenience and reduced pricing, rather than a fundamental critique of the quality offered by the Kirana stores, in Q-commerce market contestation. Adaptation data reflects an increasing response of the Kirana stores (delivery, WhatsApp/GPay), but a lack of partnership with platforms, indicating risk or relative weakness. Social capital items are mixed: technology unites but, at the same time, can decrease the number of social, informal encounters.



## Conclusion & Recommendations

Q-commerce is more than a new kind of retailer: it is a new standard for a service (speed, seamless ordering, promotions on price). The kiranas that survive will do so by protecting their relational advantage, selectively incorporating the service component (delivery, online ordering/payment). The informally integrated character of the urban neighborhood is viewed as being under erosion, a consequence of the shift in routine behavior patterns from “walking and chatting” to “ordering and receiving.”

Kirana owners need to emphasize light-weighted, multi-channel operations (WhatsApp catalog, broadcast discounts, simple delivery paths), though transparency regarding deep discounts (as price cuts were seen to be the strongest motive to switch shops) and ‘digital enablement without dependency’ initiatives need to be taken into account by the government. At the local level, interventions (using local loyalty, local events connected to micro-retails) could help to partially revive social interaction, provided ‘soul change’ attitude reaches the desired levels.

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