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Thar Gazing: Social Media Sensationalizing of Mahindra Thar – A Qualitative Content Analysis of Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube

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Abstract

Mahindra Thar SUV has transcended its utilitarian roots to become a cultural phenomenon in India, fueled by social media's obsessive celebration of its aesthetics and off-road prowess. This study investigates "Thar Gazing," a term coined to describe the curated glorification of the Thar on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Through qualitative content analysis of 150 posts (June–December 2024), the research identifies how visual storytelling, influencer narratives, and community-building tactics amplify the Thar's symbolic value. Key themes include the romanticization of retro-futurism, hypermasculine performance, aspirational escapism, and digital tribalism. Findings reveal that social media platforms act as echo chambers, reinforcing the Thar's mythos while sidelining practical critiques. The study underscores the interplay between algorithmic amplification and consumer identity formation, offering insights for automotive marketers navigating the digital attention economy.

Keywords: Thar Gazing; Mahindra Thar; social media algorithms; SUV culture; influencer marketing; consumer identity.

1. Introduction: The Rise of the Thar as a Digital Icon

In 2020, Mahindra & Mahindra relaunched the Thar, a SUV modeled after the iconic Willys Jeep, blending retro styling with modern amenities. By 2023, it had become India's most Instagrammed car, with over 500,000 posts hashtagged #MahindraThar. This meteoric rise is not merely a triumph of engineering but a product of social media's power to mythologize machines. Platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook have transformed the Thar into a canvas for aspirational storytelling, where ruggedness meets luxury and individualism intersects with community.

This study interrogates how digital platforms sensationalize the Thar, leveraging its design and off-road capabilities to craft a narrative of rebellion and belonging. While existing literature explores SUV marketing (e.g., Bradshaw et al., 2022), few studies dissect the role of user-generated content (UGC) in shaping automotive desire.

UGC (User-Generated Content) refers to any form of content—such as text, images, videos, reviews, or social media posts—created and shared by unpaid individuals (consumers, fans, or influencers) rather than by brands or organizations. In the context of the study on "Thar Gazing," UGC specifically includes posts, reels, videos, comments, and testimonials created by Mahindra Thar owners, enthusiasts, or influencers on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. These posts glorify the SUV's design, performance, and lifestyle appeal without direct involvement from Mahindra's official marketing teams.

2. Role of UGC in the Study

2.1. Central to the Analysis

The study focuses on UGC to understand how ordinary users and influencers frame the Thar's identity. Examples include:

- o Instagram reels of Thar owners showcasing custom modifications (e.g., off-road tires, rooftop tents).
- o YouTube videos of users testing the Thar's off-roading capabilities in extreme terrains.
- o Facebook posts celebrating "Thar meetups" or sharing travelogues.

2.2. Key Features of UGC in Thar Gazing

- o **Authenticity:** UGC is perceived as more genuine than corporate advertising, fostering trust (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021). For instance, a YouTube creator's "unboxing" video of their Thar delivery feels relatable to viewers.
- o **Amplification:** Algorithms prioritize emotionally engaging UGC (e.g., adrenaline-fueled off-roading clips), boosting visibility (Bishop, 2023).
- o **Community Building:** Hashtags like #TharNation or #TharAdventures help users connect, creating a sense of belonging (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

3. UGC vs. Brand-Generated Content:

- o While Mahindra's official campaigns highlight technical specs, UGC emphasizes emotional experiences (e.g., a family's cross-country road trip in a Thar).
- o Influencers often blend UGC with subtle branded partnerships, blurring the line between organic and sponsored content (FTC, 2023).

3. Why UGC Matters in the Study

3.1. Drives Consumer Perceptions:

UGC shapes how potential buyers view the Thar. For example, viral videos of the SUV conquering rocky trails reinforce its "rugged" image, overshadowing critiques about fuel efficiency.

3.2. Fuels Algorithmic Sensationalism:

Platforms like Instagram prioritize UGC that generates high engagement (likes, shares), creating a feedback loop where Thar-related content becomes increasingly sensationalized (e.g., extreme stunts, aspirational

travel content).

3.3. Builds Brand Communities:

UGC fosters loyalty among Thar owners, who refer to themselves as "Tharriors." This tribal identity is sustained through shared rituals, such as posting "delivery day" photos or participating in off-road challenges.

4. Ethical Considerations with UGC

- Selective Representation: UGC often omits practical drawbacks (e.g., high maintenance costs) to maintain the Thar's idealized image (Lutz, 2021).
- Influencer Transparency: Some creators fail to disclose paid partnerships, misleading audiences (FTC, 2023).

5. Example from the Study

A YouTube video titled "Thar vs. Himalayan Mudslide" (1.5M views) exemplifies UGC:

- Created by an adventure influencer, not Mahindra.
- Shows the Thar navigating treacherous terrain, with dramatic editing and heroic narration.
- Comments section filled with aspirational messages like, "I need this car to feel alive!"

As 68% of millennials trust influencers over traditional ads (Edelman, 2021), understanding this dynamic is critical for decoding contemporary consumer behavior.

6. Literature Review: SUVs, Social Media, and the Performance of Identity

6.1. SUVs as Cultural Artifacts

SUVs have long symbolized power and status (Veblen, 1899), but their digital-age reinvention as "lifestyle enablers" reflects shifting consumer priorities. Bradshaw et al. (2022) argue that SUVs are marketed as "mobile territories," offering emotional security in an unstable world. The Thar's rugged exterior and open-top design tap into what Sheller (2018) terms "automotive affect"—the visceral thrill of controlling a machine in wild landscapes.

6.2. Algorithmic Amplification and Brand Communities

Social media algorithms prioritize emotionally charged content, favoring awe-inspiring visuals and tribal narratives (Bishop, 2023). This creates echo chambers where Thar enthusiasts, or "Tharriors," reinforce shared identities through hashtags like #TharNation. Such communities align with Muniz and O'Guinn's (2001) concept of "brand religion," where members evangelize products as sacred objects.

6.3. Nostalgia and Retro-Futurism

The Thar's retro design capitalizes on nostalgia, a potent marketing tool in post-pandemic consumer culture (Holbrook, 2023). By merging vintage aesthetics with modern tech, it embodies "retro-futurism"—a trend

where the past is reimagined as a utopian future (Reynolds, 2022).

6.4. Critiques of SUV Glorification

Scholars caution against uncritical celebration of SUVs, citing environmental harm (Paterson, 2020) and urban impracticality (Dennis & Urry, 2021). Yet, these critiques are conspicuously absent from Thar-related UGC, suggesting a curated reality.

7. Methodology: Decoding the Thar's Digital Ecosystem

7.1. Data Collection and Sampling

A purposive sample of 150 posts (50 each from Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube) was gathered using hashtags #MahindraThar, #TharAdventures, and #TharModification. Posts included reels, long-form videos, and photo essays published between June and December 2022.

7.2. Analytical Framework

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify patterns. NVivo software facilitated coding for visual elements (e.g., camera angles, landscapes) and textual narratives (e.g., captions, comments). Triangulation with platform analytics (views, likes, shares) revealed engagement trends.

7.3. Ethical Considerations

Publicly available data was anonymized, with usernames redacted. Private accounts and underage users were excluded.

8. Findings and Discussion: The Anatomy of Thar Gazing

8.1. "From Steel to Status Symbol: The Thar's Visual Allure"

62% of Instagram posts framed the Thar against dramatic backdrops—snow-capped Himalayas, desert dunes—using drone shots and golden-hour lighting. Influencers styled the SUV as a "steel protagonist," with captions like "Beauty with Brawn" and "Retro Rebel." This aligns with Belk's (2020) notion of "aesthetic consumption," where objects become extensions of personal identity. The Thar's boxy silhouette and customizable accessories (e.g., snorkels, roof racks) were fetishized, mirroring the "Instagrammability" of luxury goods (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

8.2. "Conquering Chaos: Ruggedness as Performance Art"

YouTube videos focused on off-roading feats, with titles like "Thar vs. Impossible Terrain." Creators emphasized mud-splattered tires and roaring engines, often narrating drives as "epic battles." These performances echo Campbell's (2022) theory of "automotive masculinity," where SUVs symbolize dominance over nature. One viral video (2.1M views) showed a Thar scaling a 45-degree slope, accompanied by comments like "King of the Jungle!"

8.3. "Wanderlust Warehousing: The Thar as a Lifestyle Catalyst"

Facebook groups like "Thar Travellers" showcased the SUV as a gateway to nomadic living. Posts featured rooftop tents, bonfire gatherings, and "#VanLife" aesthetics, blending practicality with romance. This mirrors Sheller's (2004) argument that cars are "emotional containers," storing fantasies of freedom. However, such content rarely addressed the Thar's 15 km/l mileage or urban maneuverability, perpetuating what Lutz

(2021) calls “adventure-washing.”

8.4. “Tribes and Algorithms: Building the #TharNation”

Communities thrived on exclusivity. New owners posted “Thar delivery day” videos, greeted with celebratory emojis, while critics were dismissed as “haters.” This tribal behavior aligns with Tajfel’s (1979) Social Identity Theory, where group affiliation boosts self-esteem. Facebook polls revealed 89% of members prioritized “community respect” over fuel efficiency, underscoring the SUV’s symbolic capital.

9. Conclusion: The Paradox of Thar Gazing

The Thar’s social media stardom reveals a paradox: it is both a machine and a metaphor. Platforms amplify its rugged charm while silencing pragmatic concerns, creating a feedback loop of desire. For marketers, this signals the need to harness UGC’s authenticity while addressing sustainability. Future research should explore how algorithmic biases shape automotive trends and the long-term societal costs of SUV sensationalism.

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