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Aims & Scope

This book brings together a curated collection of contemporary teaching cases that address the critical intersections of technology, management, heritage, and society. Its primary aim is to provide students, educators, and practitioners with analytical frameworks and real-world narratives that stimulate critical thinking, strategic decision-making, and ethical reflection. By drawing from diverse contexts ranging from artificial intelligence in software engineering to platform strategies in digital markets, and from heritage-based product revival to global sustainability dilemmas the book creates a holistic platform for experiential learning.

The scope of the book extends across multiple disciplines within management and applied social sciences. It is designed to serve postgraduate and executive learners in areas such as Strategy, Technology and Innovation Management, International Business, Marketing, Entrepreneurship, and Business Ethics. Each case integrates theoretical underpinnings with contemporary practice, enabling learners to bridge the gap between academic concepts and practical realities.

Beyond the classroom, this book aspires to be a resource for policymakers, industry professionals, and researchers interested in understanding the evolving challenges of globalization, digital transformation, sustainability, and cultural authenticity. The cases are structured to encourage debate, problem-solving, and the application of evidence-based frameworks, while also emphasizing inclusivity, governance, and long-term value creation.

Ultimately, the book's aim is not only to document business dilemmas, but also to empower future leaders to think critically, act responsibly, and innovate sustainably in an increasingly complex global environment.

Editor's Note

It gives me great pleasure to present this collection of teaching cases that explore the intersections of technology, strategy, heritage, and society. Each case in this book is designed not merely to illustrate business dilemmas, but to provoke critical inquiry, debate, and reflection on the choices that leaders, managers, and innovators must make in an age of disruption.

From the role of engineers in an AI-augmented workplace, to the reinvention of cultural beverages for global markets, and the challenges of trust and safety in digital platforms, these cases embody both rigor and relevance. They highlight how strategy today cannot be divorced from ethics, sustainability, and inclusivity.

My hope is that this book serves as a catalyst for students, educators, and practitioners to engage deeply with the nuances of decision-making in real-world contexts. May it inspire not only sharper analysis, but also more responsible leadership in shaping the future of work, markets, and communities.

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CASE STUDY - 1

CTRL+ALT+TOON: IS CARTOON NETWORK REBOOTING FOR GEN ALPHA?

Abstract:

This case study explores the rise, decline, and ongoing reinvention of Cartoon Network (CN), a pioneering children's television brand navigating the disruptions of the digital age. Launched in 1992 with a foundation in Hanna-Barbera's animation library, CN quickly evolved from reruns to original programming, producing global hits such as Dexter's Laboratory, The Powerpuff Girls, and Ben 10. Decades of corporate restructuring including mergers under Time Warner, AT&T, and Warner Bros. Discovery combined with drastic cost-cutting measures eroded its creative autonomy and market presence. Parallel to these organizational shifts, fundamental changes in consumer behavior reshaped the media landscape. Gen Alpha audiences increasingly gravitate toward short-form, algorithm-driven platforms like YouTube and TikTok, undermining CN's traditional episodic storytelling. The network's dependence on Warner Bros. Discovery's streaming service, Max, further limited its reach, resulting in steep declines in advertising revenue and brand relevance. Despite these challenges, CN retains valuable intellectual properties and strong nostalgic equity among millennials, offering potential leverage for reboots, cross-platform adaptations, and glocalized content strategies. Recent initiatives such as reviving legacy franchises, investing in digital-first animation, and launching region-specific offerings in India signal a bid to reposition CN as both a heritage brand and a contemporary content creator. The case highlights strategic inflection points in legacy media, offering insights into how brands balance nostalgia with innovation, manage corporate disruptions, and adapt storytelling to fragmented attention spans. It prompts students to evaluate whether CN can reinvent itself sustainably in an attention economy dominated by short-form, platform-native content.

Introduction

Cartoon Network (CN), once a dominant force in children's television programming, has experienced dramatic transformations over the past three decades. From its inception in 1992 as a pioneer in 24-hour animated content to its struggle for survival in the age of streaming and short-form digital content, CN's journey offers deep insights into the interplay between creative evolution, corporate restructuring, technological disruptions, and changing consumer behavior. This case study examines the trajectory of CN, the challenges it faced due to industry-wide upheavals, and its ongoing revival strategy in a reimagined entertainment ecosystem.

Learning Outcomes:

1. Analyze industry disruption – Evaluate how technological shifts and changing consumer behaviors reshape legacy media business models.
2. Assess corporate strategy – Understand the impact of mergers, acquisitions, and restructuring on creative industries and brand identity.
3. Evaluate digital-first approaches – Critically examine strategies for transitioning from traditional broadcast formats to streaming and short-form platforms.
4. Leverage brand equity – Explore how nostalgia, intellectual property (IP), and cultural heritage can be repurposed for new markets and audiences.
5. Develop global-local strategies – Formulate approaches for content localization and international expansion in emerging markets like India.

The Genesis and Rise of Cartoon Network

Cartoon Network was born out of a strategic acquisition by media mogul Ted Turner, who in 1991 purchased Hanna-Barbera's extensive cartoon library. This move laid the foundation for a revolutionary concept: a 24/7 television network dedicated exclusively to animated content. Initially showcasing classics such as Scooby-Doo, The Flintstones, and Yogi Bear, CN capitalized on nostalgia to engage a multigenerational audience.

It wasn't long before the network started to invest in original programming. The late 1990s ushered in a golden era with shows like Dexter's Laboratory, Johnny Bravo, Ed, Edd n Eddy, and The Powerpuff Girls. These shows weren't just entertaining; they were experimental, boundary-pushing, and wildly successful. CN evolved from being a rerun machine to a creative powerhouse.

The Corporate Climb and Expansion

In 1996, Turner Broadcasting merged with Time Warner, bringing CN under the WarnerMedia umbrella. This marked the beginning of Cartoon Network's deeper integration into a vast media conglomerate. The strategy worked well initially. With the backing of Warner Bros.' infrastructure and global reach, CN developed multiple revenue streams, from toys and games to theme park collaborations.

One of CN's biggest successes, The Powerpuff Girls, became a $2.5 billion brand by 2015. Similarly, franchises like Ben 10 were monetized extensively. CN also broadened its audience

base with the introduction of Adult Swim (targeting late-night adult viewers) and Cartoonito and ACME Night (for preschoolers and families).

The Industry Shake-up and Decline

The momentum began to falter in the late 2010s. In 2018, telecommunications giant AT&T acquired Time Warner (renamed WarnerMedia) for $85 billion. The deal came burdened with immense debt and regulatory scrutiny. In an effort to streamline operations and reduce costs, the company began aggressive restructuring.

By 2022, AT&T spun off WarnerMedia and merged it with Discovery, Inc. to form Warner Bros. Discovery (WBD). Under the leadership of CEO David Zaslav, the new entity initiated significant budget cuts across the board. CN's studio in Burbank was shut down, its website folded into Warner Bros. Animation, and dozens of employees and creators were laid off. These moves, aimed at immediate cost-saving, had severe consequences for long-term creativity.

WBD also removed nearly 36 CN titles from its streaming platform HBO Max (later rebranded as Max) to save licensing costs and optimize tax write-downs, further alienating loyal viewers and creators.

Shifts in Viewer Behavior: The YouTube Generation

Perhaps even more disruptive to Cartoon Network's stability than the series of corporate mergers and internal cost-cutting exercises was the rapid and irreversible transformation in content consumption behavior particularly among its core audience: children and pre-teens. Over the past decade, digital disruption has not only redefined *how* media is consumed but also *what* content is considered engaging. In contrast to earlier generations who eagerly awaited their favorite shows during scheduled TV slots (e.g., 5:30 PM after-school cartoon blocks), today's young viewers demand on-demand, short-form, and highly personalized content delivered instantly and algorithmically.

A critical driver of this behavioral shift is the proliferation of platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and YouTube Shorts. These platforms fundamentally rewired attention spans, expectations, and even content formats. With their user-generated content ecosystems and advanced recommendation algorithms, they provide a continuous stream of dopamine-fueled micro-entertainment. These bite-sized videos often last less than a minute, are visually stimulating, and are immediately accessible on smartphones and tablets devices that have now become the default screen for the younger generation. The traditional 22-minute episodic format of shows

like *Dexter's Laboratory* or *The Powerpuff Girls*, once a hallmark of Cartoon Network's storytelling strength, now struggles to retain attention in a market where engagement is measured in seconds, not minutes.

The data is telling. As of 2024, approximately 75% of Indian parents reported that their children primarily accessed animated content through YouTube. This was not just a regional anomaly but part of a global trend. The implications are profound: platforms that prioritize quantity over narrative depth and frequency over production value are capturing the lion's share of children's screen time. This has upended traditional content pipelines, devalued long-term storytelling arcs, and marginalized legacy channels like Cartoon Network that built their brand on rich character development and cohesive world-building.

Major competitors such as Netflix and Disney+ were quick to respond to these shifts. They began experimenting with shorter episode lengths, modular series structures, and binge-ready formats allowing children to watch multiple micro-episodes in a single sitting. This approach not only matched evolving attention spans but also enabled better alignment with recommendation engine algorithms, maximizing time spent on platform. Disney's *Baymax!* Netflix's *Boss Baby* shorts, and even rapid-fire miniseries from studios like DreamWorks Animation have embraced this strategy with notable success.

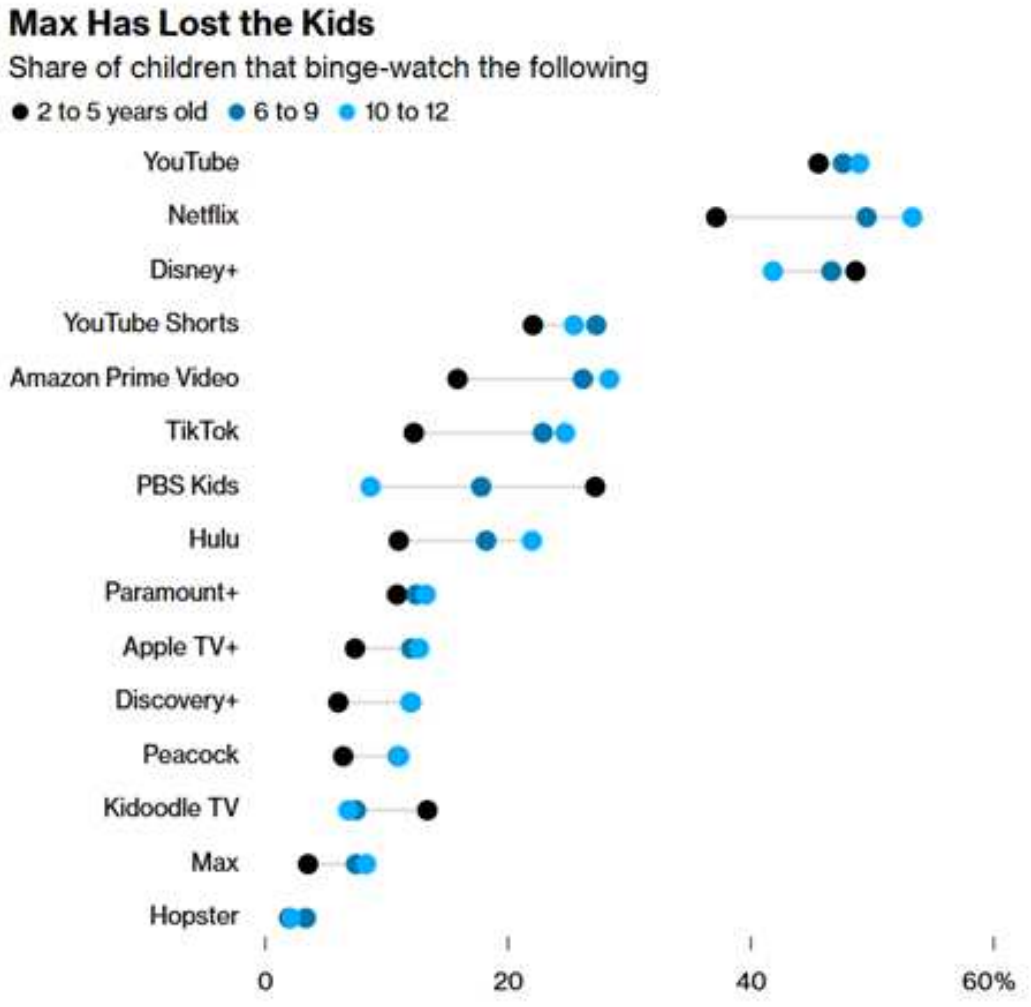
In contrast, Cartoon Network was slow to pivot, hampered by organizational uncertainty following multiple rounds of layoffs, studio integrations, and platform reassignments. While CN did attempt to explore new avenues such as Adult Swim, Cartoonito, and crossovers with gaming and mobile media their core offering remained largely anchored in legacy formats. The network's dependence on Warner Bros. Discovery's streaming service Max, which failed to gain significant traction among younger audiences (as evidenced in the binge-watching statistics from Precise.tv), further restricted its ability to re-engage its primary demographic.

The broader implication of this behavioral shift is not merely a challenge in platform preference but a complete reconceptualization of storytelling, engagement, and monetization in children's media. Where traditional networks focused on season arcs and merchandising strategies that unfolded over months or years, platforms like YouTube and TikTok thrive on instant virality, meme-ability, and frequent creator-audience interactions. This new paradigm places traditional animation studios in a precarious position, forcing them to either evolve or risk obsolescence.

For Cartoon Network, the path forward may lie in integrating its storytelling strengths with modern formats, such as releasing serialized mini-episodes optimized for mobile viewing,

collaborating with YouTube-native creators, and developing hybrid content that balances narrative coherence with algorithmic performance. As nostalgia becomes a viable commercial strategy, CN may find a second life by targeting millennial parents who still hold emotional value for its IPs and are willing to introduce them to their children preferably through newer, more digestible formats.

The emergence of the "YouTube Generation" has rendered old media consumption models increasingly obsolete. Cartoon Network, once the undisputed king of children's television, now stands at a critical inflection point. To survive and thrive, it must break from its traditional broadcast DNA and reimagine itself for a generation raised on swipes, skips, and short-form storytelling.



Source: Precise TV, Bloomberg

Financial Consequences and Revenue Collapse

The shift in viewer behavior and internal cost-cutting had a profound financial impact. CN and Adult Swim's combined annual advertising revenue dropped from $660 million in 2014 to just $130 million in 2024. As shows were shelved and ad dollars evaporated, the network's very identity became diluted. CN's relevance as a children's programming leader was in question. WBD took a $9.1 billion write-down on its linear TV networks, including CN, acknowledging the shrinking value of traditional broadcast platforms. While devastating, this also provided an opportunity to decouple CN from short-term financial expectations and allow it room to pivot.

The Road to Reinvention: Digital-First Strategy

Despite the turmoil, the animation industry remains robust. Globally valued at $400 billion and projected to reach $600 billion by 2030, animation has not lost its allure only the modes of delivery have changed. Recognizing this, WBD has begun repositioning CN as a digital-first animation studio. This includes a renewed focus on Adult Swim content like Rick and Morty, now returning for its eighth season. CN is reviving fan-favorite franchises including The Powerpuff Girls and The Amazing World of Gumball while developing new titles like Iyanu and a modern Looney Tunes movie. These efforts aim to combine nostalgia with contemporary sensibilities, targeting millennial parents as much as younger viewers. CN content is being strategically licensed to platforms like Hulu and Discovery+, ensuring steady monetization while widening audience reach beyond the Max ecosystem.

CN's Strategy in the Indian Context

India represents a crucial market for CN's revival. With an abundance of local animation talent and a rapidly growing VFX industry, India is both a content creator and a consumer. Recognizing this, CN launched 'CN Rewind' on Prime Video India in 2024, offering dubbed, locally tailored legacy content under a subscription model. This local-first strategy aligns with the broader trend of regional customization in digital content. India's animation and OTT industries are growing in tandem, with a rising appetite for animated IPs. CN is now investing in more Indian storylines, characters, and production partnerships, effectively localizing its global identity.

Broader Implications for the Media Industry

Cartoon Network's story is emblematic of wider disruptions in the entertainment industry. From cable TV to YouTube Shorts, and from studio headcount to algorithmic optimization, the

tectonic plates of media economics have shifted irreversibly. The tension between short-term virality and long-form storytelling lies at the heart of these changes. While short-form content dominates platforms like TikTok and YouTube, truly iconic IPs like Pokémon, Ben 10, or Dragon Ball Z emerged from decades of narrative investment and world-building. Today's monetization metrics often favor engagement over enrichment. Yet, there remains a strong emotional and economic case for high-quality animated storytelling. As Vice President Michael Ouweleen aptly noted, the history of animation is one of continuous adaptation. Cartoons have survived transitions from theatre to television, VHS to streaming, and now television to mobile. CN's efforts to realign itself with modern consumption habits while retaining its creative DNA may serve as a template for other legacy studios.

Decision-Point Ending

As Warner Bros. Discovery doubles down on repositioning Cartoon Network for a digital-first future, the brand stands at a critical crossroads. The nostalgic value of its IPs like *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Ben 10*, and *The Amazing World of Gumball* offers a powerful springboard. Yet the changing dynamics of children's entertainment dominated by short-form platforms, algorithmic engagement, and mobile-first experiences demand more than nostalgia. They demand reinvention. With declining ad revenues, limited traction on Max, and increasing competition from YouTube, TikTok, and Netflix, the pressing question remains: Can Cartoon Network reinvent itself without losing its soul? Should it lean fully into nostalgia and adult animation? Should it localize globally, as it is attempting in India? Or should it disrupt itself by building native-first content for platforms like YouTube Shorts and TikTok? Executives, creators, and fans alike now face a defining choice: cling to the legacy or shape a new identity. Because in the attention economy, where loyalty is fleeting and content is infinite, only those who adapt creatively and quickly survive. So, the decision rests:

What should Cartoon Network do next to secure its future?

Should it focus on long-form stories that build enduring franchises, or pivot entirely toward short-form content to capture Gen Alpha's fragmented attention spans?

How does it honor its past while preparing for a very different future?

The screen is waiting. And so are its next-generation viewers.

Further Reading

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4. Illouz, E. (2019). The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations. Oxford University Press. – Explores how digital platforms and dating apps reshape intimacy, expectations, and user fatigue.

5. Government of India. (2023). Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. – Critical legal framework affecting dating apps in India, directly tied to compliance, privacy, and monetization strategies.

TEACHING NOTES

CTRL+ALT+TOON: IS CARTOON NETWORK REBOOTING FOR GEN ALPHA?

Case Summary

This case traces the evolution, challenges, and strategic reinvention of Cartoon Network (CN), a once-iconic children's television brand, as it grapples with the dual forces of corporate restructuring and rapid shifts in content consumption behavior. The narrative follows CN's journey from its pioneering days in the 1990s to its near-collapse under Warner Bros. Discovery's cost-cutting initiatives, and its current attempt to reimagine itself as a digital-first brand amidst declining ad revenues and the rise of algorithm-driven, short-form platforms like YouTube and TikTok.

Teaching Objectives

By the end of the case discussion, students will be able to:

- Understand the lifecycle and transformation of a legacy media brand in response to technological disruptions.
- Analyze the strategic impact of corporate mergers and acquisitions on creative industries.
- Evaluate digital-first content strategies and audience targeting in the age of streaming and mobile consumption.
- Assess the viability of nostalgia-driven IP reboots versus platform-native content creation.
- Explore localization strategies for global content brands in emerging markets like India.

Target Audience

This case study is ideally suited for students and professionals engaged in disciplines such as Strategic Management, Media and Entertainment Business, Digital Marketing, Organizational Change and Innovation, and International Business, particularly within the context of emerging markets. It is tailored for learners at the postgraduate level, including those pursuing MBA, MMS, or PGDM programs, as well as participants in executive education courses. The case provides rich material for analyzing the interplay between corporate restructuring, digital transformation, and consumer behavior shifts making it highly relevant for individuals aiming to understand strategic decision-making and innovation in a disrupted media landscape.

Theoretical Foundations

To critically analyze Cartoon Network's transformation and revival strategy, the following three major theories provide essential conceptual grounding:

Disruptive Innovation Theory (Clayton Christensen)

This theory explains how new technologies and business models disrupt established players by offering more accessible, affordable, and user-centric alternatives. In this case, YouTube, TikTok, and streaming platforms disrupted traditional television networks like Cartoon Network by offering short-form, algorithm-driven, on-demand content that better aligns with changing viewer behavior, particularly among children and pre-teens.

Resource-Based View (RBV) of the Firm

RBV posits that a company's sustained competitive advantage lies in its unique internal resources and capabilities that are valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN). Cartoon Network's intellectual properties such as *The Powerpuff Girls*, *Ben 10*, and *The Amazing World of Gumball* serve as key strategic assets. The company's ability to repackage and monetize these legacy IPs in new digital formats underlines the application of this theory.

Strategic Inflection Point Theory (Andy Grove)

This theory refers to a critical turning point in a company's trajectory caused by significant external shifts, where past strategies no longer suffice, and fundamental change becomes necessary. Cartoon Network is facing such an inflection point due to technological disruption, evolving viewer preferences, and declining ad revenues. The company's pivot toward a digital-first animation strategy exemplifies a realignment necessitated by this theoretical framework.

Teaching Pedagogy

The teaching approach for this case is structured to promote critical thinking, active discussion, and strategic decision-making through a blend of individual analysis, collaborative learning, and guided facilitation. The pedagogy integrates real-world application with theoretical foundations to help students assess dynamic business challenges in media and digital environments.

1. Case Method Discussion

This case is ideal for a Socratic-style, discussion-based session. The instructor plays the role of a facilitator, encouraging students to examine the multi-layered aspects of Cartoon Network's strategic dilemmas. Open-ended questions should be used to provoke debate around technological disruption, innovation resistance, content strategies, and corporate decision-making.

2. Pre-Class Preparation

Students should be required to:

- Read the full case thoroughly.
- Watch 1–2 short videos or ads from both legacy CN content (*The Powerpuff Girls*, *Ben 10*) and competitor platforms (e.g., *YouTube Kids*, *Netflix Kids*, *Disney+ Hotstar*).
- Review assigned readings on Disruptive Innovation, Resource-Based View, and Strategic Inflection Points (either theory overviews or short academic articles).
- Reflect on personal media consumption changes from childhood to adulthood.

Pre-reading and media review primes students for better engagement in class.

3. In-Class Structure (90–120 Minutes)

A. Icebreaker Discussion (10 minutes)

Prompt students with the question:

"What was your favorite Cartoon Network show growing up? Where do you watch content today?"

This creates personal engagement and connects the topic with generational context.

B. Chronological Case Walkthrough (20 minutes)

Guide students through the major stages in the case:

- The early rise of CN
- Corporate mergers and revenue challenges
- Shifts in viewer behavior
- CN's digital pivot and localization in India

Encourage brief student input at each transition point to track causes and consequences.

C. Group Activity – Strategic Analysis (30 minutes)

Split the class into small groups. Each group takes on a strategic role:

- Group A: WBD Executive Board – Should CN focus on reviving classic IPs or create new digital-first characters?
- Group B: Digital Strategy Team – How can CN engage Gen Alpha across platforms like YouTube Shorts or TikTok?
- Group C: International Expansion Team – How should CN expand in markets like India, Africa, or Latin America?

Each group presents their strategic recommendations supported by theories (RBV, Disruptive Innovation, etc.).

D. Plenary Discussion – Decision Point (20 minutes)

Revisit the case's final questions:

- Can CN thrive in a short-form, attention-fragmented world?
- Is nostalgia a strategy or a trap?
- Should CN separate its content brand from Max?

Use a whiteboard or digital board to map out students' ideas and categorize responses.

E. Wrap-Up and Learning Reflection (10 minutes)

Summarize key takeaways. Assign a short reflective writing or strategic memo: *"If you were the new head of Cartoon Network Studios, what would be your first three strategic actions for revival?"*

4. Cross-Disciplinary Integration

- **Marketing**: Content segmentation, consumer behavior, nostalgia marketing.
- **Strategy**: Resource leverage, innovation management, ecosystem competition.
- **International Business**: Glocalization and market entry strategies.
- **Media Studies**: Evolution of content formats and attention economy.

5. Optional Assignments or Extensions

- **Short Essay**: "How does algorithmic content delivery impact creativity in children's media?"
- **SWOT Analysis**: Prepare a SWOT matrix for Cartoon Network's future prospects.
- **Comparative Analysis**: Compare CN's strategy to that of a competitor like Nickelodeon or YouTube Kids.
- **Creative Pitch**: Ask students to pitch a short-form animated series that could work on both YouTube and Max.

This pedagogy ensures that students not only understand the business case of Cartoon Network but also acquire transferable skills in strategic thinking, digital transformation, and innovation execution.

Epilogue

As of mid-2025, Cartoon Network stands as a symbol of both nostalgic memory and ongoing reinvention. While the brand has faced significant challenges organizational shake-ups, revenue declines, shifting audience preferences, and platform migration it continues to adapt within an evolving media landscape. Under Warner Bros. Discovery's renewed focus, CN is embracing a digital-first content strategy, reviving beloved franchises, and experimenting with format innovation across platforms like YouTube, Max, and Prime Video India. Notably, *The Powerpuff Girls* reboot is scheduled for a multi-platform release, *Rick and Morty* has sustained its cult popularity, and new IPs like *Iyanu* aim to diversify the content slate for a global audience. In India, localized content initiatives and dubbing efforts have expanded the channel's reach among regional viewers, demonstrating the potential of glocalized storytelling. Still, the stakes remain high. The media ecosystem continues to reward short-form virality over long-form creativity, and audience loyalties shift with the swipe of a screen. The question for Cartoon Network is no longer just about survival, but relevance. Can it become not just a platform for cartoons, but a cultural force once again redefining how stories are told and consumed in the digital era? The screen has changed, the stories are shorter, and the competition is relentless. But if there's one thing history has shown, it's that animation, like imagination, is infinitely adaptable. Cartoon Network's next chapter will depend on its ability to blend legacy with innovation and in doing so, inspire a new generation of viewers who may not yet know that their favorite channel is ready for a comeback.

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CASE STUDY - 2

SECOND SLICE OF INDIA: PAPA JOHN'S 90-DAY RE-ENTRY DILEMMA

Abstract

In August 2025, Papa John's prepares a second shot at India after exiting in 2017, appointing Arjun Mehta at PJP Investments (backed by Levant Capital) to lead a Bengaluru launch and a phased rollout. The case places students at a 90-day decision point: how should a challenger re-enter a Domino's-dominated market where platform discounts, rents and wages compress margins even as demand grows? Domino's first-mover playbook deep localization, disciplined cluster density, and reliable delivery has yielded share, while Pizza Hut and regional brands such as La Pinoz intensify competition. Papa John's earlier missteps US-centric menu, premium pricing, and slow expansion offer cautionary lessons. The re-entry team must now choose among three paths: (A) premium niche in metro micro-markets; (B) value challenger at scale; or (C) a localized hybrid with disciplined density and a balanced channel mix (own-app plus platforms). Students will analyze India-specific consumer preferences, design a veg-forward offer architecture, and build a store-level P&L to test contribution, break-even, and payback under aggregator fees and discount pressure. They will specify a service promise, map city sequencing, and define a 12-month KPI dashboard and risk mitigations. The decision: which path maximizes sustainable, margin-accretive growth and under what triggers should the team pivot within the first year?

Introduction

India's organised pizza market is a paradox: fast-growing, fiercely contested, and habit-driven. Since 1995, Domino's has entrenched itself through aggressive localization, dense delivery clusters, and operational reliability, while Pizza Hut and regional upstarts such as La Pinoz compete on format, flavor, and price. Into this battlefield steps Papa John's again. After a decade-long first stint that ended in 2017 amid mispricing, a US-centric menu, and slow expansion, the brand is preparing a Bengaluru relaunch through franchise partner PJP Investments, backed by Levant Capital. The mandate is clear: design a go-to-market that creates distinctive value without igniting ruinous price wars. Students assume the role of Arjun Mehta, India launch lead, tasked with choosing among three paths premium niche, value challenger, or localized hybrid and translating that choice into offer architecture, channel mix, city sequencing, and a credible service promise. The central question: how can Papa John's build sustainable, margin-accretive share in a Domino's-led ecosystem?

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

1. Diagnose India's pizza/QSR competitive structure first-mover vs. challenger dynamics and pinpoint the strategic wedges available to a re-entrant brand.
2. Evaluate market re-entry options (premium niche vs. value vs. localized hybrid) and justify a partnership/franchise model (e.g., with PJP/Levant) suited to Indian consumer, cultural, and regulatory realities.
3. Construct and stress-test a store-level unit-economics model (AOV/mix, aggregator commissions/discounting, food cost, labor, occupancy) to estimate contribution margin, break-even, and payback sensitivity under price wars and cost inflation.
4. Design a differentiated positioning + menu-localization playbook (veg-forward SKUs, Indian flavor profiles, offer architecture) and propose a pricing/promotion strategy that protects margin without a race-to-the-bottom.
5. Plan a tiered expansion & channel strategy (cluster density, dark kitchens vs. dine-in, own app vs. aggregator, service-level promises) and specify a 12–18-month KPI dashboard (repeat rate, NPS, delivery time, contribution/store/week, store-payback).

Central Discussion

A decision in 90 days

On a humid August morning in Bengaluru, Arjun Mehta, the India launch lead for Papa John's partner PJP Investments, stared at a war-room wall covered in city maps, rent comps, and delivery heatmaps. The first Papa John's outlet was scheduled to open in Bengaluru within the next two months. Contracts for three additional sites were ready to sign. Yet the board wanted clarity on one thing: What will make Papa John's stick in India this time? Arjun had ninety days to recommend a go-to-market blueprint positioning, offer architecture, city rollout, and a channel strategy that would survive India's fierce pizza wars.

India's pizza wars: first mover vs challenger

India's quick service restaurant (QSR) landscape is a story of first movers and fast followers. In pizza, Domino's is the undisputed pioneer. Entering in 1995, it localized aggressively vegetarian-heavy menus, tandoori flavors, price points under tight consumer budgets and then

built density, delivery speed, and habit. Over the years, it captured over half of the organized pizza market and nearly 70% of online pizza delivery. Pizza Hut remained the closest multinational challenger, while La Pinoz and regional specialists carved out fast-growing niches. Challengers experimented with dine-in ambiance, thicker crusts, and premium toppings, but Domino's defended the high ground with reach, consistency, and value engineering.

Papa John's first attempt (2006–2017): what went wrong?

Papa John's entered India in 2006 with global ambition but a US-centric playbook. The brand positioned itself premium and pushed a menu heavy on red meats pork and beef in a country where large consumer segments avoid them for cultural or religious reasons. Its pricing sat well above mass value cues. While Domino's sprinted into tier-2/3 towns and built the "30 minutes or free" delivery habit, Papa John's footprint plateaued at 66 stores across 11 cities. Without tight localization, aggressive cluster density, or a compelling value ladder, the brand failed to convert trials into habit. By 2017, it exited. Internally, managers called it a lesson in "copy-paste globalization" a strategy that ignored the Indian context.

The market today (2025): a bigger pie, thinner slices

Fast forward. The pie is bigger India's pizza market is worth roughly ₹15,000 crore, growing at about 9.3% annually but slices are thinner. Domino's has scaled past 2,240 outlets, with Pizza Hut at less than half that number. Regional chains now hold close to 30% of the organized market, competing with high flavor intensity and neighborhood familiarity. Platform economics have reshaped demand discovery and pricing: aggregator discounts drive trials but squeeze store-level margins; rent and wages have climbed in prime micro-markets; and consumers love deals but punish inconsistency. Even Domino's, despite operating margins near 19%, has seen net profit margins trend down over the decade as real estate and staffing costs bite. India's young, digital consumer base offers runway, but it is also trained to comparison-shop, review, and switch.

Why try again? The re-entry logic

PJP Investments (backed by Levant Capital) runs 100+ Papa John's outlets across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. The group has experience adapting menus to non-US tastes, orchestrating delivery-heavy operations, and scaling through franchise models. The India thesis leans on three beliefs: (1) Headroom pizza penetration remains low relative to global

benchmarks; (2) Escape-competition effect intense rivalry forces innovation in operations and positioning; and (3) Playbook transferability a Middle East-tested franchise operator can localize faster than a US corporate-led approach.

Still, Arjun knows none of that guarantees product–market fit in India. His recommendation must translate belief into sequenced choices.

Choice set: three paths to market

Option A: Premium niche, metro-focused

Papa John's leans into its "Better Ingredients. Better Pizza." promise premium cheese blends, cleaner labels, specialty crusts and targets affluent metro micro-markets (Bengaluru CBD, Gurugram Cyber City, South Mumbai). Price realization is higher and discounts are controlled. The channel mix favors own-app for loyalty data and limited aggregator exposure to protect contribution margins. The store format is smaller dine-in + high-throughput delivery, with one commissary per city to standardize dough and reduce waste.

Risks: Narrow addressable market; slower brand salience against value-led rivals; higher rent pressure in A-grade locations.

Option B: Value challenger at scale

The brand attacks Domino's heartland with a value-led ladder ₹99–₹129 entry SKUs, aggressive combo pricing, and ultra-local flavors (paneer makhani, achari). It goes early into tier-2/3 with compact delivery kitchens, using aggregators for demand generation. The play requires tight cost control centralized prep, simplified SKU count, ruthless portion engineering.

Risks: Margin erosion in discount cycles; head-to-head price wars; risk of diluting "better ingredients" equity.

Option C: Localized hybrid with disciplined density

A middle path: Metro-led launch with distinctive, veg-forward localization (e.g., tandoori paneer, corn & capsicum with peri-peri drizzle), clear mid-tier pricing, and disciplined cluster density (3–5 outlets per 5–7 km trade area before adding a new city). Build own-app loyalty (earn–burn, birthday rewards, late-night slots) while using aggregators opportunistically. Introduce limited-time Indian flavors every quarter to create news and learn faster.

Risks: Execution complexity (dual-channel, rotating LTOs); requires strong data cadence to keep discounts targeted, not blanket.

What will it take to win this time?

1) Product & localization

The brand must start veg-first, with eggless options and non-beef/pork defaults. Flavor notes should skew Indian without parody tandoori, achari, peri-peri and be stackable with simple toppings to keep the makeline fast. Crust variety is a differentiator if operationally simple (e.g., one specialty crust beyond classic). Garlic sauces a Papa John's signature can be reimagined with Indian herbs as a distinctive dip that's hard to copy.

2) Offer architecture & pricing

India is promotion-savvy. The case for laddered pricing is strong: an accessible entry (to drive trials), a value combo (to anchor AOV), and signature premiums (to preserve brand equity). Day-part deals (lunch combos) and occasion-led offers (game nights) can widen use-cases. Discounts should be data-targeted via own CRM to avoid permanent markdowns.

3) Channel & delivery promise

Speed is table stakes; reliability is the moat. A credible service promise could be "Fresh and hot in 30–35 minutes" with transparent tracking. Own-app must deliver frictionless UX and earn–burn loyalty from day one. Aggregators remain essential for discovery; the discipline is to cap platform discount exposure and seed differentiated SKUs on the own-app.

4) Economics & format

The store archetype matters more than brand aspiration. India rewards compact, delivery-optimized boxes (700–1,000 sq ft), 2–3 km delivery radii, and commissary-enabled dough to reduce store labor. A first-principles unit P&L must hold under stress: AOV, food cost %, aggregator takes rates, labor and occupancy, utilities, marketing, and waste. The payback target should be <24 months with 4–6% contribution swings tested for rent inflation and discount spikes (see Exhibit 3).

5) Footprint & sequencing

Arjun's team proposes a Bengaluru - Hyderabad - Pune sequence, each with cluster-first density before national PR blasts. Tier-2 pilots (e.g., Mysuru, Jaipur) can run as dark or hybrid kitchens

once commissary logistics are proven. Each new city opens with 3–5 outlets within six months to reach marketing and logistics efficiency.

6) Brand & communication

The brand must be clear and memorable: "Better Ingredients, Made for India." Communication should spotlight quality cues (dough, cheese, sauce) and the localized flavor journey. Sampling partnerships (college fests, tech parks) and late-night delivery can seed habit. For credibility, the brand voice must acknowledge the 2017 exit "We learned what India loves" and show what's different now.

Execution risks

- Menu sprawl from over-localization leading to makeline slowdowns and waste.
- Discount dependency on aggregators eroding contribution.
- Real estate creep overpaying for A-grade frontage that the delivery-heavy model doesn't need.
- Supply chain variability cheese and fresh veg price volatility without hedging or alternates.
- Talent churn at store manager level, undermining consistency.

Mitigations include SKU discipline, own-app targeting, rent-to-sales guardrails, dual-supplier contracts, and career-pathing for store managers with performance-led incentives.

The decision point

With leases awaiting signatures, Arjun must pick a path. Option A protects brand equity but risks narrow scale. Option B buys trials fast but threatens margins and distinctiveness. Option C balances scale and equity, but only if the organization can execute a data-driven, disciplined play. The board's question is simple, but unforgiving:

Which positioning, offer architecture, and rollout plan maximize odds of sustainable, margin-accretive growth in India and what service promise and KPI dashboard will prove it within the first 12 months?

Discussion Questions:

- What is Domino's moat in India today, and which two entry wedges should Papa John's target justify each in one sentence from the case data?

- Choose one GTM path (A/B/C) and defend it; state your key non-negotiables and specific pivot triggers within 6–12 months.
- Using the case data, build a monthly store P&L and report contribution % and break-even orders/day; test sensitivity to aggregator fee and rent.
- Design a 6-SKU value ladder and 4 localized signature SKUs; outline a 90-day offer plan that drives repeat without a price war.
- Set a public service promise and an aggregator vs own-app split policy; explain how this protects margins and data in the launch micro-markets.

Exhibits:

Exhibit 1. Platform Fees 101 (Instructor Handout)

Concept	Key Note
Aggregator Fee Basis	Applied on **post-discount GMV**
Contribution Formula	Net Sales – (Food cost + Packaging + Platform fees) – Store OPEX
SLA Feasibility	Depends on cluster density (2–3 km radii), not storefront glamour
Menu Discipline	Avoid menu sprawl; stick to 6-SKU ladder + 4 localized signatures

Source: Author's compilation based on case teaching note. Supplementary reference: Zomato Annual Report FY24–25 (aggregator take-rates, fee structures); KPMG India CX Report 2025 (service-level expectations).

Exhibit 2. Board Plan (Visual Scaffold)

Panel	Content
1	**Strategy:** A/B/C vote (top); Moat vs Wedges (mid); Guardrails + Pivot Triggers (bottom)
2	**Numbers:** P&L rows - Net Sales, Fees, Food, Packaging, Contribution, OPEX, EBITDA, Break-even, Sensitivity deltas; Footer → KPI targets + red-lines
3	**Design & Delivery:** 6-SKU Ladder + 4 Signatures; 90-day Offers; SLA & Channel Policy

Source: Author's compilation from teaching plan. Anchored in: Khanna & Palepu (2010), *Winning in Emerging Markets* (institutional voids & rollout density); Ghemawat (2001), *Distance Still Matters* (CAGE distance for re-entry).

Exhibit 3. Quant Assumptions for P&L Exercise

Variable	Value
Average Order Value (AOV)	₹ 350
Order Mix	65% aggregator / 35% own-app
Discounts	Aggregator: 12%; Own-app: 5%
Aggregator Fee	22% of post-discount GMV
Food Cost	32% of net sales
Packaging	₹12 per order
Monthly OPEX – Labor	₹ 1,60,000
Monthly OPEX – Rent	₹ 2,40,000
Monthly OPEX – Utilities	₹ 60,000
Monthly OPEX – Marketing	₹ 40,000
Total OPEX	**₹ 5,00,000**
Target Orders/Day	120 (~3,600/month)

Source: Author's compilation based on Papa John's India case assumptions. Secondary validation from: Jubilant FoodWorks Annual Report FY24–25 (Domino's India unit economics: AOV, food cost %); Ambit Capital QSR Thematic Report (2023) (rent bands, labor cost ratios).

Exhibit 4. Illustrative 90-Day Offer Ladder

Phase (Days)	Offer Concept	Channel Focus	Discount/Targeting Rule
1–30	Lunch Combo (slice + drink + add-on)	Own-app + limited platform	Platform: first-order only, ≤10% cap
31–60	Game-Night Bundle (family + 2 sides)	Own-app loyalty	Use earn-burn rewards, platform capped
61–90	Quarterly LTO (signature flavor)	Own-app CRM	Targeted nudges (win-back/frequency); no blanket promos

Source: Author's compilation based on case teaching plan. Secondary validation: IMARC Group (2025), *India Pizza Market Forecast* (day-part consumption trends, ~9% CAGR); The Tribune (Jun 2025), *La Pino'z article* (regional promotion practices).

Further Reading

Reuters (Aug 26, 2025). Papa John's re-entry headlines, partner structure, and ambitious India footprint useful as a short "what's new" pre-class context.

Jubilant FoodWorks (FY24–FY25). Integrated/annual reports for Domino's India: footprint, digital mix, store economics great for exhibits and benchmarking density/SLA claims.

IMARC Group (2025). India pizza market size/CAGR triangulates TAM claims for market entry debates.

Zomato Annual Report (FY24–FY25). Platform scope & take-rate context for aggregator exposure assumptions.

Ambit Capital (2023) QSR Thematic; KPMG India CX '25. Penetration, density, and CX touchpoints to enrich SLA and omnichannel discussion.

Frameworks: Ghemawat's CAGE, Levitt's Globalization of Markets, and Khanna & Palepu's Institutional Voids to structure re-entry and localization logic.

TEACHING NOTES

SECOND SLICE OF INDIA: PAPA JOHN'S 90-DAY RE-ENTRY DILEMMA

Case Summary:

In August 2025, Papa John's re-entering India through franchise partner PJP Investments (backed by Levant Capital) prepares a Bengaluru launch after its 2017 exit. Protagonist Arjun Mehta, India launches lead, has 90 days to recommend a go-to-market plan in a Domino's-dominated landscape where platform discounts, rising rents, and wage inflation compress margins even as demand grows. The case contrasts Domino's localized, density-led playbook with Papa John's earlier missteps (US-centric menu, premium pricing, slow expansion) and frames three options: A) premium niche in metro micro-markets, B) value challenger at scale (including tier-2/3), or C) localized hybrid with disciplined cluster density and a balanced aggregator/own-app mix. Students must analyze India-specific consumer preferences, design a veg-forward offer architecture, build a store-level P&L (AOV/mix, food cost, aggregator fees, labor, occupancy), set a credible service promise, outline city sequencing, and specify KPI targets and pivot triggers to achieve sustainable, margin-accretive growth in year one.

Teaching Objectives:

1. Diagnose India's pizza/QSR competitive structure and prioritize two challenger wedges for Papa John's.
2. Evaluate the three go-to-market paths (A/B/C) and commit to one with explicit constraints and 6–12-month pivot triggers.
3. Construct a monthly store-level P&L, compute contribution % and break-even orders/day, and stress-test aggregator fee and rent sensitivities.
4. Design a 6-SKU value ladder and 4 localized signature SKUs, and orchestrate a 90-day offer plan that drives repeat without a price war.
5. Plan a channel mix and service-level promise that protect margins and first-party data in launch micro-markets.

Target Audience

Audience. MBA/PGDM students in Strategy, Marketing Strategy, Operations/Service Ops, International Business/Market Entry, and Entrepreneurship electives; adaptable for Executive Education cohorts focused on India entry, franchising, or QSR/retail scale-up.

Course placement. Best taught mid-module in a strategy, market-entry or platforms/omnichannel course after competitive advantage & network effects, before

regulation/trust and scaling governance. Also fits late in service-operations (service levels, density, unit economics) or as a capstone GTM case.

Prerequisites. Core strategy (industry analysis/Porter, RBV), managerial accounting (basic P&L, contribution, break-even), intro marketing (positioning/offer architecture), and service operations (SLAs, delivery radii, capacity basics). Spreadsheet literacy for a short P&L build.

Companion theories & tools used in class. First-mover vs. fast-follower advantage; CAGE distance & institutional voids; platform/two-sided economics (aggregators, take-rates, discount externalities); service-ops cluster density and reliability; value-based pricing & promotion ladders; glocalization (local menus with brand coherence); franchise/operator governance & incentive alignment; unit-economics sensitivity (fees, rent).

Session formats.

- MBA/PGDM (90–120 min): cold open - moat/wedges - quant P&L - A/B/C decision - KPI/pivot gates.
- Exec Ed (60–75 min): pre-class memo + in-class decision clinic with abbreviated P&L sensitivity.

Prerequisites & Pre-Class Preparation

Prerequisites (skills/knowledge).

Core strategy (industry/positioning trade-offs), basic managerial accounting (contribution, break-even), service ops (SLAs, delivery radii), spreadsheet fluency (very light).

Student-facing pre-class (10–15 minutes total; no external research).

Read the case once, then complete either the 5-question mini-quiz or the 150-word memo prompt below. Bring results to class.

Option A - Mini-Quiz (5 MCQs; closed book to outside sources)

(All data needed appear in the case; answer in 6–8 minutes.)

Q1. Domino's most defensible *moat* in India is primarily:

A) Celebrity advertising B) High-end toppings C) Cluster density + reliable 30–35 min delivery D) Large dining rooms

Q2. An aggregator order has AOV ₹350. A merchant-funded promo of 12% applies, and the aggregator fee is 22% of GMV after discount. Platform fee (₹) ≈?

A) ₹77 B) ₹68 C) ₹42 D) ₹96

Q3. Which entry menu best preserves makeline speed and waste control?

A) 12 crusts × 18 sauces B) 6-SKU value ladder + 4 localized signatures C) 30 fully custom SKUs D) "Build-your-own" only

Q4. Which is a leading pivot trigger for a new QSR rollout?

A) Annual EBITDA margin B) Repeat-order rate by Month 3 C) Year-end NPS only D) Brand awareness after 12 months

Q5. Which launch pattern best supports a public 35-minute SLA?

A) One store per city in five metros B) 3–5 stores clustered within 2–3 km radii in one city C) Dark kitchens spread 10–12 km apart D) A-grade mall sites across the city without clustering

Answer Key: Q1–C, Q2–B (~₹68), Q3–B, Q4–B, Q5–B.

Option B - One-Page Memo (≈150 words; 6–8 minutes)

Prompt. From the case facts, (i) name two entry wedges for Papa John's (1 sentence each with evidence), and (ii) choose one GTM path (A/B/C) with one non-negotiable constraint and one 90-day leading indicator you will track.

Submission format: 3 short paragraphs; no tables; no outside data.

Optional instructor handout (1-minute "Platform Fees 101" primer)

- Aggregator fee is applied to post-discount GMV (per case assumption).
- Discounts should be cohort-targeted on the own app; cap platform exposure.
- Contribution = Net sales − (food cost + packaging + platform fees) − store OPEX.
- SLA feasibility depends on cluster density (2–3 km radii) more than storefront glamour.
- Avoid menu sprawl; protect makeline speed with a 6-SKU ladder + 4 signatures.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

Teach this as a decision-driven, interactive session that moves students from diagnosis - unit-economics quantification - strategic commitment with guardrails and pivot triggers - offer/channel design - KPI commitments. The choreography below is instructor-ready,

integrates active learning, and maps visibly to your Learning Objectives and DQs. It uses your existing Session Plan, Board Plan, and Rescue Prompts exactly as scaffolded in your TN.

Teaching Flow (with instructor moves, student work, boards, probes)

0–5 min Cold Open: Commit without hedging

Instructor move: Set the dilemma: "You're Arjun Mehta. Doors open in 60–90 days. Pick ONE GTM path A: Premium, B: Value Challenger, C: Localized Hybrid." Silent vote.

Student work. Individual choice; no discussion yet.

Board capture. Panel 1 (Strategy) top row: A/B/C tally.

Why now. Forces ownership; frames all work that follows. (Aligns to LO2.)

5–17 min Diagnose Moat vs. Wedges (DQ1)

Instructor move: Prompt: "What is Domino's moat? Which two wedges can Papa John's exploit?"

Student work. 3-minute pair-think - 6-minute plenary harvest.

Board capture. Panel 1: two columns Moat (density, reliability, localized value) vs Wedges (veg-forward quality, CRM-led offers, 2–3 km clusters, late-night reliability).

Probes. "Which wedge is hardest for Domino's to copy in 60 days?" "Show me the case evidence."

Why now. Establishes strategic hypotheses before numbers. (LO1.)

17–45 min Quant Clinic: Store P&L, Break-Even, Sensitivities (DQ3)

Instructor move: Hand out Exhibit 3 assumptions; set tasks (P&L, contribution %, break-even orders/day; fee ±2pp, rent ±10%).

Student work. Team build (8 min) + team sensitivity (6 min).

Board capture. Panel 2 (Numbers) rows: Net Sales - Platform Fees - Food - Packaging - Contribution - OPEX - Store-level EBITDA - Break-even - Sensitivity deltas.

Rescue prompts. "Even if your % differs, which two levers swing contribution most?" "Mind order-of-ops: discount - platform fee - COGS."

Why now. Grounds strategy in unit economics; establishes guardrail magnitudes (rent/fees swing ~4–6 pp). (LO3.)

45–63 min Choose & Defend the Path (DQ2)

Instructor move: Prompt: "Commit to A/B/C. State three non-negotiables (guardrails) and two leading-indicator pivot triggers for Months 6–12."

Student work. 5-minute team write-up - 13-minute report-out (3 teams).

Board capture. Panel 1 (bottom): A/B/C with each team's top guardrails (e.g., Rent/Sales ≤12%, platform discount cap ≤10%) and pivot triggers (e.g., Repeat ≥25% by M4).

Probes. "Which wedge does your path truly exploit?" "What breaks if aggregator fee rises 2 pp?"

Why now. Converts analysis into disciplined commitment. (LO2.)

63–78 min Menu & Offer Architecture (DQ4)

Instructor move: Prompt: "Design a 6-SKU value ladder + 4 localized signatures; outline a 90-day offer plan that drives repeat without a price war."

Student work. 6-minute team table - 9-minute gallery harvest.

Board capture. Panel 3 (Design & Delivery): Ladder tiers (Entry-Core-Premium), signatures, 2–3 no-regret offers (lunch combo, game-night bundle, app earn-burn).

Probes. "Will your makeline survive Friday 8–10 pm?" "Which offers stay targeted (own-app/CRM) vs blanket (platform)?"

Why now. Bridges positioning to operational simplicity and repeat behaviour. (LO4.)

78–90 min Channel Mix & Service Promise (DQ5)

Instructor move: Prompt: "Set a public SLA (time + radius) and your aggregator vs own-app policy (discount caps, app-exclusive SKUs/loyalty)."

Student work. 4-minute team draft - 8-minute share.

Board capture. Panel 3 (right): SLA line (e.g., ≤35 min within ≤2.5–3.0 km), platform discount cap (≤10%), own-app levers (exclusive SKUs, earn-burn, cohorts).

Probes. "Will this SLA hold in monsoon traffic?" "What's the plan if own-app stalls at 35% mix?"

Why now. Locks channel economics and reliability into the plan. (LO5.)

90–100 min KPI Commit & Instructor Synthesis

Instructor move: Prompt: "Write five 12-month KPIs with targets and red-line thresholds (**stop, slow, scale gates**)."

Student work. Rapid card post; instructor clusters and synthesizes.

Board capture. Panel 2 (footer): Repeat %, On-time %, NPS, Contribution/store/week, Payback months with red-lines and pivots.

Wrap. Generalize: cluster density - SLA credibility; CRM-targeted offers - margin defense; guardrails - survival in price wars. (All LOs.)

Classroom Setup & Roles

Teams. 4–6 students; assign IDs A–F. Works with 60–120 students in parallel.

Room/Materials. 3 board panels, timer, projector (optional), one-page Quant Assumptions handout.

Instructor voice. Use short "moves" and pointed probes; keep momentum by parking tangents on board margins.

Breakout vs Plenary Balance

- **Pair-think** (diagnosis) engages quieter students early.
- **Team quant** (P&L) builds collaborative reasoning without losing non-quant peers (you debrief to common drivers).
- **Plenary** (defense, design, SLA/KPIs) surfaces trade-offs and comparative logic.

Steering & Rescue (when discussion stalls or derails)

Stuck in A/B/C debate? Jump to P&L first; return to strategy with numbers in hand.

Over-indexed on creativity? Re-anchor to makeline speed and SKU discipline.

Math overload? Focus on levers: platform take-rates & rent bands move contribution by ~4–6 pp; that's the strategy signal.

- **Use your prompts.** "Which wedge would Domino's struggle to copy in 60 days?" "Show one offer you'd keep without discounts." "Can your SLA hold at 3 km when it rains Friday 8–10 pm?"

Time Adaptations

- **If only 90 minutes:**

  Moat/wedges = 8 min (5–13).

  Quant clinic = 20 min total by assigning one sensitivity/team and swapping results (17–7).

  Merge Menu + SLA into a 10-minute sprint (60–70).

  KPIs = 5 min (85–90).

- **If 120 minutes:**

  Add **role-play** (Ops vs Marketing) on discount caps (10 min).

  Deepen quant sensitivity (AOV ±₹25; COGS ±2 pp) (10 min).

  Add city rollout grid for Bengaluru (3–5 clustered stores; radii; rent bands) (10 min).

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

DQ1. What is Domino's moat in India today, and which two entry wedges should Papa John's target?

Moat (what students should surface):

Domino's defends share through disciplined cluster density (tight 2–3 km radii), reliable 30–35 min delivery, and deep localization/value engineering that turns trial into habit; it captures a dominant share of online pizza orders, reinforcing flywheel effects in operations and marketing.

Two high-leverage wedges for Papa John's (justify each in one line):

1. Veg-forward quality with simple, Indian-tuned flavor architecture (e.g., tandoori/achari notes; eggless defaults) to differentiate on perceived ingredient quality without makeline sprawl aligned with "Better Ingredients, made for India."
2. Disciplined micro-cluster rollout + CRM-led own-app offers (cap blanket platform discounts) to sustain SLA credibility and protect contribution while building first-party data for targeted promotions.

DQ2. Choose one GTM path (A/B/C) and defend it with guardrails and pivot triggers.

Recommended path: Option C – Localized Hybrid with Disciplined Density.

Why: Balances scale and equity veg-first localization and mid-tier pricing, while clustering 3–5 stores per 5–7 km trade area for SLA reliability and efficient local marketing. Keeps platform exposure bounded and pushes loyalty on the own app.

Three non-negotiable guardrails (constraints):

1. Discount discipline: Platform discount cap ≤10%; use cohort-targeted offers on own app (no permanent markdowns).
2. Real estate discipline: Rent/Sales ≤12% in launch micro-markets; avoid A-grade frontage that the delivery-heavy model doesn't need.
3. Service promise feasibility: Public 35-minute SLA within ≤2.5–3.0 km only where cluster density supports it; no single "citywide" SLA.

Pivot triggers (6–12 months):

Repeat-order rate ≥25% by Month 4; if not, revise entry ladder and offer cadence.

On-time delivery ≥90% from Month 2; if not, tighten radius or add a node to the cluster.

Contribution margin band 48–52% by Month 6 with store payback ≤24 months; if breached, reset rent band and platform mix, or pause rollout.

DQ3. Build a monthly store P&L; report contribution % and break-even orders/day; test sensitivity to aggregator fee and rent.

Use the case's Exhibit-style assumptions (AOV ₹350; 65% aggregator / 35% own-app; promos 12%/5%; aggregator fee 22% of post-discount GMV; food cost 32% net; packaging ₹12/order; monthly OPEX: labor ₹1.60 L, rent ₹2.40 L, utilities ₹0.60 L, local mktg ₹0.40 L; target 120 orders/day).

Step-through (30-day month, 3,600 orders):

Net sales (after discounts):

- Aggregator: 2,340 orders × ₹350 × (1–0.12) = ₹7,20,720
- Own-app: 1,260 orders × ₹350 × (1–0.05) = ₹4,18,950
- Total Net Sales = ₹11,39,670

Platform fees (cost): 2,340 × (₹350 × 0.88 × 0.22) ≈ ₹1,58,558

Food cost (32% of net sales): ₹3,64,694

Packaging (₹12 × 3,600): ₹43,200

Contribution = Net Sales – (Food + Packaging + Platform) = ₹5,73,217

Contribution % = 50.3% (≈ ₹5.73 L / ₹11.40 L)

Store OPEX (L+R+U+M): ₹5.00 L

Store-level EBITDA ≈ ₹0.73 L/month

Contribution per order ≈ ₹159 - Break-even ≈ 105 orders/day (OPEX ÷ contrib/order ÷ 30)

Sensitivity checks:

- Aggregator fee +2 pp (to 24%): Contribution ≈ ₹5.59 L; EBITDA ≈ ₹0.59 L; BE ≈ 107.4 orders/day.
- Aggregator fee –2 pp (to 20%): Contribution ≈ ₹5.88 L; EBITDA ≈ ₹0.88 L; BE ≈ 102.1 orders/day.
- Rent +10% (₹2.64 L): EBITDA ≈ ₹0.49 L; BE ≈ 109.7 orders/day. Teaching cue: emphasize that rent bands and platform take-rates swing 4–6 pp of contribution these are the strategy guardrails.

DQ4. Design a 6-SKU value ladder and 4 localized signatures; outline a 90-day offer plan that drives repeat without a price war.

6-SKU value ladder (keep makeline fast; common bases; 1 specialty crust max):

Entry (₹99–129): Classic Margherita (veg), Onion-Capsicum (veg)

Core (₹179–229): Veggie Trio; Paneer & Corn

Premium (₹279–349): Tandoori Paneer; Smoky Peri-Peri Veg

4 localized signatures (limited, distinctive, copy-resistant but simple to assemble):

Tandoori Paneer Supreme (mint-yogurt drizzle)

Achari Corn & Capsicum

Peri-Peri Veggie Crunch

Paneer Makhani Delight

These honor veg-first preferences and Indian flavor notes without exploding SKUs or prep time.

90-day offer plan (own-app led; cap blanket platform discounts):

- Days 1–30: Own-app Lunch Combo (slice + drink + add-on) to seed habit; platform: first-order only discovery, capped ≤10%.

- Days 31–60: Game-Night Bundle (family size + 2 sides) with earn-burn loyalty on own-app; platform discounts unchanged/capped.
- Days 61–90: Quarterly LTO (one signature flavor) + targeted CRM nudges (win-back and frequency boosters); no blanket promos.
- Guiding rules: avoid menu sprawl; keep makeline speed; target via CRM on own-app; cap platform exposure.

DQ5. Set a public service promise and aggregator vs own-app policy; explain how this protects margins and data.

Service promise: "Fresh & hot in ≤35 minutes within a ≤2.5–3.0 km radius" only in micro-clusters that can actually deliver; be transparent on radius/time.

Channel policy:

Mix target: Own-app ≥40% by Month 6 (from 35% startup mix); use app-exclusive SKUs and earn-burn to pull share.

Discount policy: Cap platform discount ≤10%; push cohort-targeted offers on own-app; keep platform SKUs/pricing neutral to avoid permanent markdowns.

Why it works: Tight radii + density preserves SLA credibility; first-party data (own-app) enables targeted promotions with lower leakage; capping platform exposure protects contribution from take-rate + promo stacking.

Epilogue

By November 2025, Papa John's Bengaluru launch went live with three clustered outlets in Indiranagar and Koramangala. The brand led with a 6-SKU value ladder and four localized signatures, positioning itself as a veg-forward premium-value hybrid. Early results showed encouraging traction: average order values held near ₹340, repeat orders crossed 22% by Month 3, and own-app sales steadily climbed to 37% of mix, aided by app-exclusive bundles. Yet challenges persisted. Rising platform take-rates pressured contribution margins, while high-street rents strained unit economics. Domino's, meanwhile, intensified promotions, reminding Papa John's that density and reliability remain critical moats. Arjun Mehta's team faced a pressing question: should they double down on the Bengaluru cluster before expanding to another metro, or accelerate cautiously into Tier-2 cities to capture growth ahead of rivals? The outcome of that decision would define whether Papa John's second slice of India could finally endure.

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CASE - 3

JUST VIBE AND CODE? WHY AI CAN'T REPLACE ENGINEERS (YET)

Abstract

This case explores the evolving role of software engineers in the era of generative AI, framed through a weekend experiment that produced over 15,000 lines of code for a pet-focused social network without a single line manually written. Using three AI coding agents for backend, frontend, and infrastructure, the project initially suggested that human programmers could be displaced. The reality revealed AI's limitations: forgotten instructions, misaligned modules, subtle security flaws, and inconsistent coding styles. The human engineer became less a coder and more a conductor designing architecture, coordinating outputs, and ensuring accountability. The case situates this experience within a broader debate: Is AI replacing software engineers, or redefining their roles as orchestrators, strategists, and ethical overseers? Comparisons with other industries such as accounting and manufacturing suggest that automation rarely eliminates professions but reshapes them. Engineers face not only technical challenges but also legal and ethical responsibilities, from data privacy to intellectual property compliance. Students are invited to evaluate AI's strengths and weaknesses, analyze how professional roles shift, assess ethical risks, and formulate strategies for employability and governance in an AI-augmented workplace. This case is designed for courses in technology management, business strategy, ethics, and the future of work, encouraging critical debate on how human creativity and accountability can harmonize with machine intelligence.

Introduction:

Artificial intelligence is transforming software development, with tools like GitHub Copilot and multi-agent frameworks raising questions about the future of programming. Some predict that AI will replace large parts of human coding, while others see it as a complement that changes not eliminates the engineer's role. This case explores a striking example: a weekend experiment where a developer built a pet-focused social network using only AI coding agents. In under 48 hours, the system produced nearly 15,000 lines of functional code across backend, frontend, and infrastructure. At first glance, this suggested that human programmers might soon be obsolete. The process exposed AI's limitations forgotten instructions, misaligned modules, and hidden bugs. The human engineer was not displaced but redefined: less a coder, more a conductor, architect, and accountability bearer. This case examines what that shift means for technology management, professional skills, and the future of work.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

1. Evaluate the opportunities and limitations of AI coding agents in accelerating software development, using the 15,000-line weekend coding gauntlet as context.
2. Analyze how the role of human engineers is shifting from individual code contributors to orchestrators, architects, and accountability bearers in AI-assisted projects.
3. Assess the ethical, legal, and security challenges of deploying AI-generated code, including issues of ownership, privacy compliance, and system vulnerabilities.
4. Compare the impact of AI on software engineering with automation trends in other industries such as accounting and manufacturing, to identify patterns of augmentation versus replacement.
5. Formulate strategies for engineers and managers to sustain employability, leadership, and competitive advantage in an AI-augmented software ecosystem.

Case Narrative: A 15,000-Line Weekend with AI

A 15,000-Line Weekend: The AI-Powered Coding Gauntlet

On a Friday evening, a developer decided to set out on a bold experiment: could an entire social network be built in a single weekend, powered almost entirely by artificial intelligence? The project's scope was modest at first a social media app designed for pet owners to share photos, connect profiles, and build a playful digital community. Yet by Sunday evening, the codebase had ballooned to nearly 15,000 lines of production-ready code.

The twist? Not a single line was written manually. Instead, three specialist AI coding agents were launched one focused on back-end logic in Python, another on the Next.js front-end, and a third dedicated to infrastructure and deployment. These agents ran on Anthropic's Claude 3 Opus API, coordinated through LangChain's multi-agent framework, and integrated with OpenAI's research-grade reasoning support. The entire process was managed through Cursor, an AI-infused editor that embedded models directly into the coding environment.

At first glance, this appeared to confirm the hype: AI could generate entire applications at unprecedented speed, potentially replacing large swaths of human programming labor. But as the hours wore on, the reality became more nuanced. The AI-generated code was fast, but often inconsistent. Modules misaligned like puzzle pieces from different boxes, bugs surfaced in

unexpected places, and subtle security oversights emerged. The human engineer's role quickly shifted away from typing syntax toward coordinating, testing, and making higher-order design decisions.

The experiment revealed an important truth: AI could accelerate development, but it did not eliminate the need for human engineers. If anything, it amplified their role in architecture, integration, and accountability.

When AI Forgets: Missteps and Human Oversight

One of the earliest challenges was memory. Large language models (LLMs) have a fixed "context window" the amount of text they can process at once. As the codebase grew, the AI agents frequently forgot earlier instructions or design specifications. In one case, a data schema was updated mid-project, but one agent reverted to the outdated version, causing cascading errors across services.

Another recurring issue was plausibility without correctness. AI agents produced code that looked convincing at a glance, but upon testing, failed in subtle ways. A function meant to sanitize user input left an opening for a potential injection attack. Another module hard-coded values that should have been configurable, limiting scalability.

The human engineer became the last line of defense. Acting as both architect and quality controller, they stitched together fragments, reviewed outputs, and ran smoke tests to catch flaws. Without this oversight, the application would have been riddled with vulnerabilities and inconsistencies.

Industry research supports this caution. A widely cited study on GitHub Copilot's performance found that fewer than one-third of generated solutions were entirely correct, with roughly 20 percent being flat-out incorrect. In other words, AI could accelerate code writing, but blind trust would result in fragile systems.

From Coder to Conductor: Redefining the Engineer's Role

Rather than handcrafting loops, queries, and interfaces, the developer in this case study resembled an orchestra conductor. Each AI agent was treated as a highly productive, but forgetful and sometimes careless, junior developer. They could produce large volumes of code quickly, but needed guidance, correction, and alignment with a larger vision. This shift in role signals a broader transformation in software engineering. Engineers are moving away from

line-by-line coding toward higher-level orchestration: designing architectures, setting constraints, verifying quality, and integrating disparate parts. In industry terms, this is sometimes called the "AI agent manager" or "code orchestrator." Historical parallels are instructive. Accountants once feared that spreadsheets and automation would make them irrelevant. Instead, their work shifted upstream, from manual reconciliation to financial analysis and strategic consulting. Manufacturing offers a similar story: robots replaced repetitive assembly tasks, but created new roles in maintenance, programming, and design. In each case, automation elevated the human role to one of oversight, creativity, and judgment. The same trajectory appears to be unfolding in software engineering. Rather than being displaced, engineers are becoming orchestrators of AI-powered teams, focusing on architecture, ethics, and user-centric innovation.

Accountability Beyond Code

Even as AI tools demonstrated impressive productivity, one element remained firmly human: accountability. If the pet social network had mishandled sensitive data say, by storing passwords insecurely or leaking user profiles the responsibility would not fall on the AI vendors. Legal liability and ethical scrutiny would rest with the developer and, ultimately, the organization that deployed the system. This principle mirrors accountability in other professions. Auditors, for example, may use software to reconcile statements, but they remain personally responsible for signing financial reports. In law, attorneys may rely on AI-assisted research, but they must still stand before a court and defend their case. In healthcare, diagnostic AI can assist, but doctors remain responsible for patient outcomes. In software engineering, AI-generated code raises unique legal and ethical challenges. Copyright remains a gray area: if AI reproduces open-source code from its training data, it could inadvertently violate licensing agreements. Privacy compliance is another concern AI agents will not automatically ensure data minimization, user consent, or secure deletion unless explicitly instructed. Security is perhaps the most pressing risk, as AI often produces functional but naive code that overlooks best practices. This reinforces a central lesson: AI does not absolve engineers of responsibility. Instead, it increases the importance of oversight, governance, and ethical diligence.

Lessons from Other Industries

The case's dilemma replacement versus augmentation is not unique to software. Other industries have wrestled with similar predictions.

- **Accounting:** Studies once suggested a 95 percent probability that chartered accountants would be automated out of existence. Instead, automation eliminated much of the grunt work, but created new roles in analysis, advisory services, and software consulting. Former bookkeepers often became experts in managing accounting platforms like QuickBooks.
- **Manufacturing:** Robotics eliminated repetitive assembly tasks, but created new demand for engineers who could design and maintain machines. Jobs shifted from execution to supervision and innovation.
- **Creative industries:** Photography did not eliminate painting; synthesizers did not eliminate guitars. Instead, each new technology broadened creative possibilities and reshaped roles.

The common thread is clear: automation rarely eliminates entire professions. Instead, it redistributes value, automates routine tasks, and increases demand for higher-order skills.

Software engineering, as this case demonstrates, is following the same pattern. Routine CRUD (Create, Read, Update, Delete) applications may increasingly be built by AI, but the demand for skilled engineers who can design modular systems, safeguard ethics, and strategically deploy AI tools is only growing.

Engineers as AI-Orchestrated Problem Solvers

The weekend project ultimately proved that AI is a powerful accelerator, but not a replacement for human judgment. Engineers are becoming less typists of syntax and more conductors of intelligent agents. Their value lies in architecture, modular design, oversight, and strategic decision-making. For students and managers, the central dilemma is clear: should engineers resist AI, fearing replacement, or embrace it as a force multiplier? The answer may shape not just employability, but the trajectory of entire industries in the AI-augmented era. The implications extend beyond software. If engineers adopt AI wisely, they can amplify productivity, reduce technical debt, and focus on innovation. But if they abdicate oversight, organizations risk fragile systems, legal exposure, and ethical lapses.

The case thus challenges future leaders to confront critical questions:

- What should the role of engineers be in AI-driven development?
- How should organizations govern AI tools in production environments?
- Where should the line between automation and accountability be drawn?

The weekend's 15,000-line gauntlet offers no easy answers, but it demonstrates one certainty: engineers remain indispensable. Not because they outpace machines in raw productivity, but because they provide the judgment, foresight, and accountability that machines cannot.

Discussion Questions

1. What key strengths and weaknesses of AI coding agents did the 15,000-line weekend project highlight, and how do these shape our understanding of their role in real-world software development?
2. How does the engineer's role evolve from a traditional coder to an orchestrator or manager of AI agents, and what skills become more critical in this shift?
3. What ethical, legal, and security risks emerge when deploying AI-generated code in production systems, and how should organizations address them?
4. In what ways does AI's impact on software engineering mirror or differ from automation in other industries such as accounting and manufacturing? What lessons can be transferred?
5. What strategies should individual engineers adopt to remain employable, relevant, and effective in an AI-augmented workplace?
6. If you were a technology manager, what policies or guidelines would you introduce to ensure the safe, ethical, and effective integration of AI coding tools into team workflows?

Further Reading

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TEACHING NOTES

JUST VIBE AND CODE? WHY AI CAN'T REPLACE ENGINEERS (YET)

Case Summary

This case examines the evolving role of software engineers in the era of generative AI through a real-world experiment: the rapid development of a pet-focused social networking application. Over the course of one weekend, three AI coding agents dedicated to backend, frontend, and infrastructure produced nearly 15,000 lines of functional code without a single line written manually. At first glance, the project suggested that AI could replace human programmers. The process revealed critical limitations: the agents frequently forgot earlier instructions, generated inconsistent or redundant modules, and introduced subtle bugs and security vulnerabilities. Rather than being displaced, the human developer assumed a new role as orchestrator and quality controller, integrating outputs, ensuring architectural coherence, and taking responsibility for compliance and accountability. The case situates this experience within broader debates on automation and professional identity, drawing parallels with industries such as accounting and manufacturing where technology has eliminated repetitive tasks while elevating higher-order skills.

The case highlights key questions for students: How should engineers adapt in an AI-augmented workplace? What governance mechanisms are necessary to integrate AI tools safely? Where should accountability rest when AI contributes to production systems? The narrative provides a platform for exploring the opportunities, risks, and ethical dilemmas of AI-driven software engineering, making it highly relevant for courses in technology management, strategy, ethics, and the future of work.

Teaching Objectives

By using this case, instructors will be able to:

- Examine the opportunities and limitations of AI coding agents in accelerating software development.
- Analyze how the role of engineers is shifting from traditional code writers to orchestrators and managers of AI-driven workflows.
- Assess the ethical, legal, and security challenges associated with integrating AI-generated code into production systems.

- Compare the impact of AI on software engineering with automation trends in other industries such as accounting and manufacturing.
- Recommend strategies for engineers to sustain employability and for organizations to implement governance policies in an AI-augmented workplace.

Target Audience

This case is most suitable for postgraduate students, particularly those enrolled in MBA, PGDM, and Master's-level programs, as well as participants in executive education workshops. It can be effectively taught in courses on Technology and Innovation Management, Business Strategy, Software Engineering Management, Business Ethics, Human Resource Management, and the Future of Work. The case is especially valuable in modules that explore the impact of emerging technologies on professional roles, organizational governance, and ethical accountability.

The narrative provides students with the opportunity to evaluate the tension between automation and augmentation, drawing parallels between software engineering and automation in other industries. Its interdisciplinary scope makes it relevant for both management-oriented and technology-focused classes, encouraging debate on issues of employability, legal responsibility, and organizational adaptation. The case is versatile and can be used as a core discussion piece in a 60–90-minute session or as a supplementary case to support teaching on AI adoption and workforce transformation.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

Pre-class Preparation (for students)

- Read the case and mark: 3 opportunities and 3 risks of AI coding agents.
- Bring one real example of automation from another industry (accounting/manufacturing/creative) to compare in class.
- Prompt (optional one-minute paper): "Will AI replace or redefine software engineers? Why?"

Materials (for instructor)

- Slides with case timeline & section headers.
- Whiteboard, flip-chart (or Miro, Jam board online).

- Timer; quick poll tool (in person: colored cards; online: poll).
- Handouts: RACI template (for role shift), Go-Live Checklist (for risk controls), 1-page policy outline.

Run-of-Show (90 minutes)

0–5 min - Warm-up Poll (Hook)

Question on screen: “AI and engineering jobs: Replace or Redefine?” Show live results to surface priors.

5–10 min - Facts & Frame

Rapid recap of the weekend build (backend/front-end/infra-agents, ~15k LOC, context limits, integration drift). State the dilemma: replacement vs augmentation and learning goals (LO1–LO5).

10–25 min / DQ1 – Opportunities & Limits (Pairs - Plenary)

Task: In pairs, list top 3 strengths and 3 weaknesses observed in the case; classify as speed, quality, integration, security, compliance.

Debrief: Build a 2×2 (Speed↑/Quality↑ vs Speed↑/Quality). - Maps to LO1.

25–40 min / DQ2 – Role Shift & RACI (Triads)

Task: Fill a RACI for a 3-agent pipeline across: Design - Implement - Review - Release.

Aim: Make “orchestrator” responsibilities explicit; surface new skills (prompt/spec writing, system design, risk gating). - Maps to LO2.

40–55 min - DQ3 – Go-Live Checklist (Breakouts, 4–5 per group)

Task: Draft a 10-point Go-Live checklist covering: IP/licensing, privacy, security, observability, rollback, documentation.

Deliverable: Prioritize top 5 controls with a one-line justification each. - *Maps to LO3.*

55–65 min / DQ4 – Cross-Industry Jigsaw

Each team brings 2 lessons from their chosen industry (accounting/manufacturing/creative): What transfers? What breaks?

Synthesize augmentation patterns vs accountability regimes. - Maps to LO4.

65–80 min DQ5 & DQ6 – Strategy Labs (Two mini-deliverables)

A) Career micro-plan (individual, 5 min): A 6-month upskilling plan (system design, prompt/specs, domain, data/docs hygiene) with 3 measurable outcomes.

B) Org policy (teams, 10 min): A 1-page policy for safe/effective AI-coding (allowed use cases, review gates: tests, SAST, DAST, license, privacy, doc standards, incident response, sign-off). Lightning share-outs (5 min). - Maps to LO5 (career & org).

80–90 min / Synthesis & Takeaways

Board the 3 Big Ideas: AI as accelerator (not replacement), engineer as orchestrator, accountability cannot be automated.

Close with: "What would you change tomorrow in your team or in your own practice?"

Board Plan (for whiteboard or slide)

- Left: Facts & Constraints (agents used, 15k LOC, context limits).
- Center: Risks - Controls (from Go-Live checklist, grouped by IP/Privacy/Security/Quality).
- Right: *Strategies*

  Personal: 6-month plan (skills/KPIs).

  Organizational: Policy gates & governance.

Time Variants

- 60 minutes: Skip the jigsaw (DQ4); compress RACI to 10 minutes; combine policy & career strategy into one 10-minute activity.
- 75 minutes: Keep RACI and Go-Live; make jigsaw a 5-minute plenary compare; shorten share-outs.
- 90 minutes (recommended): Full flow above.

Online, Hybrid Adaptation

- Use a quick poll (Zoom/Teams) for the hook.
- Breakouts: pairs (DQ1), triads (RACI), teams (checklist/policy).

- Collaboration: Miro, Jam board templates for RACI, Checklist, Policy; 60-second screen-share for outputs.

Executive Education Option (45–60 minutes)

- Focus on governance & ROI: run DQ3 (Go-Live) and DQ6 (Policy); fold role shift into the debrief; end with a 3-point action plan per leader.

Facilitation Tips

- Re-center if students get too technical: ask, "What is the managerial implication?"
- Press for trade-offs (speed vs safety; autonomy vs oversight).
- Name accountability explicitly: Who signs off? On what evidence?
- Use "What would you ship?" to make risk/benefit judgments concrete.

Common Pitfalls (and how to steer)

- Myth of full autonomy: Remind them of context window and integration drift.
- Ethics as afterthought: Force it into the Go-Live gates (privacy/IP/security).
- Binary thinking: Replace vs augment - steer to role redefinition and governance.

Optional Assignments

- Short memo (1 page): Recommend an AI-coding policy for your org.
- Reflective brief (500 words): Your 6-month upskilling plan + KPIs.
- Mini-audit: Evaluate a team's current pipeline against the Go-Live checklist.

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

DQ1. What strengths and weaknesses of AI coding agents did the 15,000-line weekend reveal, and how do these shape their role in real projects?

Model answer:

- Strengths: Speed, throughput (15k LOC in ~48 hrs), parallelization across backend/frontend, infra, rapid scaffolding/boilerplate, idea exploration.

- Weaknesses: Context limits “forgetting” earlier specs; integration drift across modules; plausibility without correctness; security oversights (sanitization); hard-coded config; inconsistent styles.
- Implication: Use agents as accelerators for well-scoped tasks with strong specs; not autonomous replacements. Human role: architecture, task decomposition, code review, tests, and integration governance.
- Acceptable variations: Students may add: maintainability/tech-debt risk; need for strong documentation and test harnesses.
- Instructor cues (what “good” looks like): Balanced 3–4 strengths vs 3–4 weaknesses + a clear statement that governed augmentation replacement.

DQ2. How does the engineer’s role evolve from coder to orchestrator/manager of AI agents? What skills matter most?

Model answer:

- Role shift: From writing loops to designing blueprints, curating prompts/specs, decomposing work, setting interfaces/contracts, reviewing outputs, and aligning modules (conductor metaphor).
- Skills: System design & modular architecture; prompt/spec writing; risk literacy (security/privacy/IP); integration/testing discipline; toolchain fluency (CI, static analysis); product/UX sense; communication & RACI-style coordination.
- RACI illustration: Architect (A) for design constraints; Agents (R) for implementation; Human engineer (A/R) for reviews & integration; Security/Legal (C) for gates; Product/Leadership (I).
- Instructor cues: Look for concrete tasks that moved “upstream” (design, interfaces) and “downstream” (reviews, releases). Tie to “AI agent manager/code orchestrator” language in case

DQ3. What ethical, legal, and security risks arise when deploying AI-generated code? How should organizations address them before go-live?

Model answer:

- **Risks:**

IP/licensing: Potential reproduction of OSS snippets without attribution; license contamination.

Privacy/compliance: Missing consent, data minimization, deletion; unsafe logs/PII handling.

Security: Input sanitization gaps, hard-coded secrets, weak auth/ACLs; naive defaults.

- **Controls (top 8–10 pick 5 to prioritize):**

1. License scan & provenance check; 2) Privacy impact assessment; 3) Threat model & secure code review; 4) Tests (unit/integration) + coverage thresholds; 5) SAST/DAST; 6) Secrets management; 7) Config externalization; 8) Observability (logs, metrics, alerts) without leaking PII; 9) Rollback plan; 10) Sign-off matrix (engineering + security + product). Instructor cues: Strong answers turn risks - named gates. Reference that the case surfaced sanitization and config issues

DQ4. How does AI's impact on software compare to automation in accounting, manufacturing? What transfers; what doesn't?

Model answer:

- Transfers (augmentation pattern): Routine work automated; human role moves to analysis/oversight/strategy (accounting) and design/maintenance (manufacturing). Productivity ↑ with governance and standards.
- Doesn't transfer 1:1: Software has high creative ambiguity and combinatorial design choices; integration complexity is greater; security,privacy stakes differ from industrial safety but are similarly non-negotiable; accountability remains human in all three.
- Conclusion: Same arc automation elevates higher-order skills but software needs stronger emphasis on architectures, interfaces, and SDLC risk gates. Instructor cues: Reward explicit parallels + limits of analogy. Tie back to the case's "replace vs augment" dilemma

DQ5. What strategies should individual engineers adopt to remain employable and effective in an AI-augmented workplace?

Model answer (6-month plan sketch):

- System design: Practice microservice, API contracts; weekly design docs.
- Prompt/spec craft: Templates for requirements, acceptance criteria, and review prompts.
- Domain depth: Choose one domain (e.g., payments, healthcare) and build a mini-knowledge base.
- Quality hygiene: Learn test design, property-based tests, CI/CD, code review checklists.
- Security & privacy basics: OWASP Top 10, threat modeling.
- Evidence/KPIs: Reduce PR cycle time; increase test coverage; defects escaped ↓; design doc quality rubric.

  Instructor cues: Look for SMART outcomes and explicit KPIs. Strong answers mirror the case's emphasis on modularity + oversight

DQ6. If you were a technology manager, what policies would you set for safe/effective use of AI coding tools?

Model answer (one-page policy skeleton):

- Scope & Allowed Use: Prototype scaffolding, boilerplate, tests, migration helpers; disallow copying large opaque blobs to production without review.
- Review Gates: Unit/integration tests; SAST/DAST; license scan; privacy checklist; security review for auth/inputs/crypto; two-person code review.
- Documentation: Design rationale, API contracts, provenance notes for AI-generated segments.
- Data Handling: No sensitive data in prompts; use redaction/proxy; logging rules.
- Accountability: Named approvers, audit trail, rollback procedures, incident response.
- Training: Mandatory developer training on AI tool use, privacy/IP, secure coding. Instructor cues: Reward concrete gates and assignment of who signs off on what. Aligns with "accountability beyond code" in the case.

Quick Marking Rubric (for instructors)

- A (Excellent): Integrates case facts with structured frameworks (RACI, checklists), articulates trade-offs, names concrete controls/KPIs, and ties back to augmentation/accountability themes.
- B (Good): Covers core points with minor gaps; some controls/KPIs but less specificity.
- C (Basic): Lists pros/cons without governance detail; little evidence of strategy or measurement.

Common Misconceptions to watch for

- "AI is fully autonomous now." Counter with context-window limits, integration drift, and plausibility errors shown in the case.
- "Security/privacy will be handled by the tool." Emphasize that diligence and compliance are human responsibilities.
- Binary framing (replace vs. safe). Steer to role redefinition + governance.

Epilogue

By the end of discussion, most classes will converge on a pragmatic stance: generative AI is an accelerator, not a substitute, and the engineer's value migrates upstream to architecture, specification, integration, and accountability. The weekend build demonstrates both the promise (speed, breadth, parallelization) and the limits (memory drift, integration mismatches, latent security and compliance risks). The managerial answer is therefore neither alarmist nor complacent: adopt AI deliberately, institutionalize guardrails (design reviews, test gates, SAST/DAST, license and privacy checks, provenance notes), and make accountability explicit through RACI-style ownership. For learners, the durable takeaway is a dual agenda skills (system design, prompt/spec craft, risk literacy, documentation discipline) and policies (allowed use, review thresholds, sign-offs, rollback). For instructors, the epilogue closes the dilemma posed at the start replace vs. redefine by reframing employability as orchestration capability and reframing governance as part of engineering, not an afterthought. A useful closing prompt is: "What will you change tomorrow in your toolchain, your team's go-live checklist, and your personal 6-month plan?" Classes that return to this question after the assignment often report fewer escaped defects, clearer interfaces, and faster reviews evidence that human judgment, when paired with AI, compounds rather than competes.

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CASE - 4

SWIPE KAR, PHIR SOCH: LOVE 404 – NOT FOUND, HOW DATING APPS WENT FROM HOT TO NOT

Abstract

Set in late 2025, this case tracks the strategic crossroads facing MingleMe, a mid-tier dating platform that thrived during the 4G boom and pandemic but now confronts a cooling category. User fatigue, trust erosion, rising acquisition costs, and tighter data-protection compliance have depressed early-life engagement and undermined willingness to pay. At a Bengaluru offsite, Growth Lead Riya Shah must recommend a portfolio for 2026 while stabilizing the next two quarters. Four options are on the table: (A) "Performance Max" for scale through sharper acquisition and outcome-based boosts; (B) Radical Trust & Safety via free liveness/KYC verification, human-in-the-loop moderation, safety nudges, and transparency reports; (C) Community & Events repositioning around curated micro-communities and opt-in verified IRL mixers; and (D) a privacy-first "AI Matchmaker" using on-device modeling and explainable matches. Students analyze platform lifecycles, unit economics (ARPU, CAC, churn, refunds), and the economics of trust, then design an execution roadmap that balances speed, credibility, and operational feasibility. The case is intended for MBA/PGDM courses in Platform Strategy, Digital Marketing, Product Management, and Technology Policy. It foregrounds ethical design and privacy-by-default as strategic differentiators rather than compliance costs, and invites meaningful debate on how to trade breadth for depth while preserving brand equity.

Introduction:

From Infinite Swipes to Intentional Connections

India's dating-app boom, powered by cheap 4G and pandemic-era isolation, is fading. MingleMe, a mid-tier platform once buoyed by rapid network effects and cheeky branding, now faces fatigue, trust erosion, rising acquisition costs, and stricter data protection rules. At a Bengaluru offsite in late 2025, Growth Lead Riya Shah must chart a defensible path for 2026. Her choices span performance-led scale, a radical trust-and-safety reset, a community-and-events repositioning, and a privacy-first AI matchmaker. This case introduces the category's cool-down dynamics and sets up analysis of platform economics, ethical product design, and strategic renewal when "infinite swipe" no longer creates value.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

1. Diagnose the causes of category slow-down in a mature, multi-sided digital market.
2. Evaluate monetization levers (subscriptions, micro-transactions, ads, partnerships) under rising CAC and churn.
3. Assess trust-and-safety investments as strategic differentiators, not only compliance costs.
4. Design repositioning options using platform strategy, value proposition redesign, and experimentation portfolios.
5. Recommend an execution roadmap that aligns product, policy, data governance, and brand narrative.

1. The Rise (2015–2021)

The inflection points for app-based dating in India arrived on the back of cheap 4G, vernacular content, and an expanding youth cohort entering campuses and gig-economy jobs across Tier-1 and Tier-2 cities. MingleMe, launched in 2016, positioned itself as playful yet aspirational "Swipe kar, phir soch" and treated growth as a local network problem rather than a national advertising sprint. City teams recruited micro-influencers from college cultural committees, stand-up open mics, and music collectives; every few weeks an "activation" stitched together pop-ups at cafés and co-working spaces with promo codes and limited-time boosts. Freemium mechanics kept the funnel wide: free daily swipes, limited likes, and a taste of premium visibility. As local liquidity improved more profiles meant faster match cycles new users felt immediate reward, which in turn amplified word-of-mouth.

Product decisions reinforced these loops. Lightweight onboarding minimized drop-off, while photo-forward profiles with quirky prompts reduced the cognitive load of ice-breaking. The recommendation engine optimized for rapid reciprocity: early matches came from geographically closer, demographically similar clusters, increasing the chance that first messages translated into short back-and-forths, then numbers exchanged, then off-platform meetings. By the pandemic years, MAUs and paying conversion peaked simultaneously as loneliness, remote classes, and postponed social rituals created both time and intent. The business model looked textbook: ad-supported free tiers, a la carte micro-transactions (boosts, super-likes), and subscriptions that unlocked extended filters, read receipts, and unlimited likes.

Revenue diversified just enough to smooth seasonality; the brand's cheeky tone softened the culturally fraught terrain of "dating" by emphasizing choice, consent, and safety nudges.

2. From Hot to Not (2022–2025): The Cool-Down

The slow-down did not announce itself with a single metric crash; it crept in across signals. User interviews captured a recurring sentiment "scrolling without connecting" as feed mechanics optimized for novelty began to feel like a slot machine: stimulating, but emotionally thin. Heavy users described "badge inflation," as once-meaningful symbols (verified photos, profile completion trophies) proliferated behind micro-paywalls, diluting their signaling power. A small but rising fraction of refund tickets centered on boosts that "didn't do anything," revealing a gap between perceived and actual value.

Trust strained under three pressures. First, the adversarial dance against fake profiles and romance scams grew costlier as bad actors learned to evade simple checks. Second, low-effort verifications selfies matched to photos without liveness detection eroded credibility among women, queer users, and first-time daters from conservative backgrounds. Third, the platform's own optimization for engagement occasionally surfaced edgy profiles or provocative prompts that spiked short-term swipes but attracted the wrong kind of attention for those seeking meaningful connections.

Monetization friction rose in tandem with fatigue. As privacy changes in mobile ad ecosystems pushed CAC up, the funnel had to work harder; install-to-registration held, but registration-to-first-message slipped. When subscriptions nudged prices upward to protect margins, a plateau appeared in willingness to pay. Users compared MingleMe with competitors experimenting in "slow dating": cap the number of daily introductions, emphasize prompts that require reflection, and add lightweight curation by moderators. Offline, smaller events board-game nights, language exchange circles, coffee cuppings felt safer and more intentional than mass parties.

Regulation added complexity without guaranteed upside. India's Digital Personal Data Protection Act (2023) tightened the screws on consent logging, data minimization, retention limits, and grievance redressal timelines. For a dating app, these compliance duties touched the most delicate surfaces: photos, chat logs, location hints, and behavioral scores. MingleMe's data-ops had to re-architect consent flows, refresh privacy notices in plain language, create DPIA-like risk analyses for new features, and stand up a grievance desk that could triage safety reports within defined SLAs.

By 2024–2025, the numbers told the story: MAUs were stable but less engaged; DAU/MAU fell from the low-20s to the high-teens; first-week messages per new user slipped from roughly nine to six; report-to-ban cycles lengthened as moderation teams struggled with spikes in nuanced cases (coercion, doxxing threats, subtle harassment); and refunds on micro-transactions doubled off a low base. CAC rose materially as auction prices climbed and lookalike audiences degraded. Competitors shifted tone from "find someone tonight" to "meet your kind" and carved out enclaves: verified-only rooms, invite-only circles, and privacy-first modules that kept sensitive inference on-device.

3. MingleMe's Moment of Truth

Inside MingleMe, the leadership offsite in Bengaluru felt less like a victory lap and more like triage. Riya Shah, the Growth Lead, had stacked slides that juxtaposed topline stability with subline strain. On a whiteboard, she sketched a simple map of value flows across three sides: new users, active users, and paying users. For new users, time-to-first-match had stretched by minutes trivial in absolute terms but corrosive to early momentum. For active users, conversations decayed faster; ghosting rose. For paying users, "outcome confidence" wobbled: boosts yielded impressions, but not always quality interactions, and premium filters sometimes narrowed pools to the point of sterility.

Qualitative research sharpened the diagnosis. Women and trans users articulated a trust calculus: Would the person be real, respectful, and safe to meet? Students in Tier-2 cities asked for culturally sensitive onboarding and language cues. Young professionals in Tier-1 cities said they were "tired of being content" they wanted fewer, better introductions, coupled with context that felt authentic rather than performative. Venue partners who once hosted loud mixers now asked for smaller, themed evenings with clear codes of conduct and ID checks at the door. Moderators flagged the cognitive toll of adjudicating grey-area disputes while also meeting turnaround goals.

Three factions emerged in strategy debates:

Scale Optimizers argued the category still rewarded breadth. If the ad stack could be tuned improve creative testing velocity, lean into short-form creator partnerships, and re-bundle micro-transactions as outcome-linked credits MingleMe could stabilize LTV/CAC without a brand overhaul. They pushed for lighter onboarding friction, geographic expansion into fast-growing college towns, and a "performance max" mindset where every rupee spent was tied to attributable outcomes.

Trust & Safety First insisted that credibility was now the core product. Identity verification proper liveness checks, document-backed KYC where lawful, and community-level safety indicators should be free and default-on, not a paid perk. They advocated human-in-the-loop moderation for high-risk flags, safety nudges in chat (detectors that suggest cooling-off or redirect to reporting tools), and quarterly transparency reports with metrics users could audit. Revenue might dip in the short run; brand equity and retention would recover it.

Community Pivoters wanted to redesign the experience around intentionality. Replace infinite swipes with finite circles hobby clubs, language cohorts, career-adjacent groups curated by lightweight hosts. Run weekly IRL mixers with opt-in identity checks and chaperoned ground rules. Charge for membership tiers that bundle event access, partner discounts (cafés, co-working spaces, art venues), and concierge support. Yes, operations would be heavier, but the moat would be cultural: users would join MingleMe for a social fabric, not a feed.

4. Strategic Options

Option A – "Performance Max" for Scale.

Execution: tighten media mix modeling, accelerate creative sprints with influencers, and re-package boosts as "result credits" (e.g., guaranteed profile spotlights measured by quality interactions rather than raw impressions). Smooth onboarding further and expand campus ambassador programs.

Pros: Fast to ship on existing rails; LTV/CAC may improve with sharper attribution; near-term revenue support.

Cons: Risks exacerbating fatigue; does little to repair trust; could entrench the very mechanics users blame for shallow experiences.

Option B – Radical Trust & Safety.

Execution: make identity verification costless and meaningful (liveness + document where appropriate); introduce context-aware safety nudges; increase human review for nuanced flags; publish quarterly transparency reports with clear definitions; add a visible "safety scorecard" that reflects community health, not user ratings.

Pros: Rebuilds credibility; aligns with DPDP principles; differentiates in a crowded market; could reduce harassment-driven churn and refunds.

Cons: Raises opex; may slow match velocity; requires careful comms to avoid implying that the platform was unsafe before.

Option C – Community & Events Repositioning.

Execution: launch pilot micro-communities in two cities with strict caps on matches per week, curated prompts, and scheduled IRL events with opt-in ID checks; recruit and train community hosts; secure venue partners and sponsor tie-ins; monetize via memberships and event passes.
Pros: Meets the cultural pivot toward "slow dating"; creates defensible local moats; diversifies revenue beyond ads and boosts.

Cons: Operational complexity; city-by-city variability; requires new competencies in events and partner management.

Option D – Privacy-First "AI Matchmaker."

Execution: move sensitive preference modeling on-device; provide "why this match?" explanations that are helpful without exposing users to profiling harms; scaffold conversations with opt-in, privacy-respecting prompts; anchor the product as ad-free, premium, and minimal.
Pros: Premium positioning; addresses algorithmic opacity and fatigue; compatible with data minimization.
Cons: Harder technically; smaller immediate TAM; messaging must avoid the creepiness trap.

Riya's team stress-tested each option against four lenses: (1) user trust and safety; (2) engagement quality (not just frequency); (3) unit economics (ARPU, CAC, refund rates, moderation cost per active); and (4) execution risk within two quarters. Option A scored best on speed but weakest on trust; Option B scored highest on credibility and medium on speed; Option C promised the largest differentiation but the heaviest lift; Option D offered a premium narrative with moderate speed if scoped tightly.

5. The Decision

The calendar added pressure: Q4 planning was two weeks away, and the board expected a coherent story for 2026 that did not rely on macro winds changing direction. Riya framed the call not as a single bet but as a portfolio with one anchor and two fast bridges.

The anchor candidate was Option B Radical Trust & Safety because it addressed the most universal pain point and aligned with the regulatory climate. It also turned compliance into brand: by voluntarily publishing transparency reports and making verification free, MingleMe

could credibly claim to be the most user-respecting large platform in the category. The risk was a short-term dip in match velocity and conversion as verification steps added friction. That could be mitigated with thoughtful UX: progressive verification (start chatting with limits, unlock more with verification), celebratory rituals around "verified together," and clear messaging that safety was an enabler, not a tax. To bridge the next two quarters, Riya considered a narrow slice of Option A and a targeted pilot of Option C. From Option A, the team could re-bundle micro-transactions into outcome-linked credits. Instead of selling raw boosts, sell "quality introductions packs" that refund credits if certain interaction thresholds aren't met (e.g., a minimum number of mutual likes or replies within a time window). This reframing would align perceived value with actual outcomes and reduce refund friction. The media and creator stack could be tuned, but always under a new creative north star: "Fewer, better introductions."

From Option C, a disciplined two-city pilot say, Bengaluru and Pune could test the community hypothesis without overextending. Each city would launch three micro-communities (e.g., board-games, indie music, and language exchange), each with a trained host and a code of conduct. Events would be small (30–40 people), ticketed for a nominal fee, with opt-in ID checks at entry and visible safety staff. Success would be measured not by headcount but by follow-up interactions: percentage of attendees who form at least one on-app connection, NPS, repeat attendance, and post-event report rates. Sponsorship conversations with cafés and co-working chains would be lined up to offset costs. If KPIs clear pre-set thresholds, the pilot scales; if not, learnings still flow back into product prompts and safety playbooks.

Option D, meanwhile, could incubate quietly with a privacy "strike team." The near-term deliverable would be an "explain my match" feature: short, human-readable rationales ("You both attend Sunday morning runs in Indiranagar and chose long-form prompts over one-liners") derived from on-device inferences and explicit signals, never from covert tracking. A simple conversation scaffold three shared-context prompts users can accept or ignore would aim to reduce ghosting without sounding like a chatbot. This seeds the premium narrative without committing to a full ad-free subscription tier before evidence accumulates.

Communication would make or break the plan. The brand had to pivot from cheeky bravado to calm confidence without losing warmth. The external narrative could center on intentionality: "Fewer, better introductions. Safer by design." Product surfaces would echo the same voice: banners that celebrate verification as community care; event pages that display

ground rules prominently; match screens that briefly explain “why” without over-promising romance or compatibility. The PR arc would leverage the transparency report: publish real numbers (definitions and denominators included), highlight investments in moderator training and user tools, and invite third-party safety advocates to review policies. Internally, Riya knew execution discipline would be as important as strategy. The company would need to reset OKRs away from raw volume and toward quality: time-to-first-meaningful-reply, report-to-resolution cycle time, verified-user share, and refund rate per 1,000 boosts. Moderation capacity planning had to absorb surges without burnout: queue triage, escalation paths for nuanced cases, and mental-health support for moderators. Data teams would re-baseline experiments to guard against p-hacking short-term engagement at the expense of trust. Finance would model the opex bump from free verification and human review, balancing it against projected churn reduction and lower refunds.

Riya drafted the slide that mattered: a one-page roadmap with three lanes. Lane 1 (Trust & Safety, Anchor): free liveness verification, upgraded reporting flows, quarterly transparency, safety nudges shipping over the next two quarters. Lane 2 (Community Pilot, Bridge): two-city, three-community launch with clear success criteria and an ops playbook first event in six weeks, review at twelve. Lane 3 (AI Transparency, Seed): “explain my match” and lightweight conversation scaffolds quiet launch to premium-curious cohorts. Across all lanes, creative and acquisition would adopt the same promise: intentionality over infinity.

The unresolved question one that only real-world data could answer was whether users would reward the pivot quickly enough. If verification slowed the first conversation by a minute but halved harassment reports, would new users perceive that as better, not worse? If events felt safe and warm but scaled slowly, would the board accept city-by-city moats over national blitzes? If “explain my match” demystified recommendations without creeping people out, could MingleMe reclaim algorithmic trust? With two weeks to lock the plan, Riya’s task was less about crafting visionary prose and more about hard choices with crisp hypotheses. In a market cooling from hot to not, the courage to trade breadth for depth and to make safety and sincerity the product, not just the policy might be the only way to make “Swipe kar, phir soch” mean something again.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the top three drivers of the category cool-down (fatigue, trust, economics, culture, regulation, competition) and how should MingleMe prioritize them, with evidence?
2. As a two-sided platform, where is MingleMe's value leaking across new users, active users, and paying users, and what design/ policy changes would plug each leak?
3. Using unit economics (ARPU, CAC, churn, refund rate), which strategic option (A–D) most improves LTV/CAC within two quarters, and why?
4. What would a "Radical Trust & Safety" roadmap look like (verification, moderation, nudges, transparency reports), and which 5 metrics should be publicly tracked?
5. If pivoting to curated communities/events, design a 90-day pilot in two Indian cities target segments, partner stack, ops playbook, and success criteria.

Further Reading

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TEACHING NOTES

SWIPE KAR, PHIR SOCH: LOVE 404 – NOT FOUND, HOW DATING APPS WENT FROM HOT TO NOT

Case Summary

Set in late 2025, the case follows Riya Shah, Growth Lead at "MingleMe," an Indian dating platform that prospered during the 4G/pandemic boom but now faces category cool-down. Symptoms include user fatigue, trust erosion, higher CAC, refunds on "boosts," and stricter privacy compliance (DPDP, 2023). Management debates four options: (A) performance-led scale with outcome-based boosts; (B) a radical trust-and-safety reset (free verification, human moderation, safety nudges, transparency reports); (C) a community/events repositioning with curated micro-communities and verified IRL mixers; and (D) a privacy-first AI matchmaker with explainable recommendations. Students must diagnose value leaks across the two-sided platform, analyze unit economics (ARPU, CAC, churn/refunds), weigh trust & safety as strategy (not just cost), and craft a portfolio recommendation: one anchor bet for 2026 plus near-term bridges and a communications plan.

Teaching Objectives

1. Diagnose category cool-down drivers in mature multi-sided markets and prioritize their strategic salience.
2. Map value creation/capture across user segments (new, active, paying) and identify "leak points."
3. Evaluate monetization choices under rising CAC and fatigue; link design choices to LTV/CAC.
4. Design a credible Trust & Safety roadmap as a competitive advantage aligned with DPDP principles.
5. Build an execution portfolio (anchor + bridges) with hypotheses, KPIs, and risk mitigations.

Target Audience

This case is designed for MBA/PGDM second-year electives in Platform Strategy, Product Management, Digital Marketing/Growth, and Technology & Policy, and it adapts well to executive education programs for product leaders and marketplace founders. It also fits advanced undergraduate capstones on digital platforms. Ideal class size is 30–80 (scales to larger cohorts with breakout teams) and a 90–120-minute session. Students should arrive

comfortable with basic unit economics (ARPU, CAC, churn/refund rates), network effects in two-sided markets, A/B testing and experimentation logic, and introductory privacy/ data-protection concepts (e.g., India's DPDP). Though situated in India's dating-app context, the decision point trust-first pivot vs. scale-first play generalizes to marketplaces facing fatigue, rising CAC, and regulatory scrutiny (mobility, creator, classifieds). The case supports memo-based assessment and KPI-anchored portfolio recommendations, aligning with reviewer expectations for decision clarity, transferability beyond the focal industry, and teachability in both in-person and online formats.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

This case can be effectively taught in a 90–120-minute session. The strategy is designed to balance student engagement with analytical rigor, guiding participants from instinctive judgments to structured, evidence-based recommendations. The pedagogy uses polls, board mapping, team workshops, and portfolio design to ensure both participation and decision clarity.

Teaching Flow

Cold Open and Poll (10 minutes)

The instructor begins by framing the central dilemma: "Which strategic option should Riya anchor for 2026?" Students vote anonymously (A/B/C/D) using a live poll (Mentimeter, Slido, or simple show-of-hands). This surfaces initial instincts without analysis. The results are displayed but not discussed until the end.

Diagnosing the Cool-Down (15 minutes)

Through a whole-class discussion, students distinguish symptoms (fatigue, trust erosion, high CAC, refunds) from root causes (design flaws, moderation limits, regulatory friction). The instructor records insights on Board 1 (Symptoms - Causes) and pushes with prompts such as:

- "Which symptom would persist even with more ad spend?"
- "Which problem would improve first if verification were fixed?"

Platform Leak Map (15 minutes)

In small teams (4–6), students analyze value leaks across three segments: new, active, and paying users. Teams fill a short grid and post their findings. The instructor synthesizes contributions on **Board 2 (Leak Map)** and highlights where leaks are most critical.

Unit Economics Debate (20 minutes)

Students are introduced to simplified formulas for LTV and CAC. Teams then evaluate the four options (A–D) and predict directional effects (+/−/0) on trust, engagement quality, LTV, and CAC. Results are mapped on **Board 3 (Options × KPIs)**. Instructor prompts include:

- "Which option most reduces refunds per 1,000 boosts?"
- "Which driver moves churn fastest in 60 days?"

Portfolio Design Workshop (20 minutes)

Teams design a practical strategy portfolio: one anchor and two bridges. They fill a mini-template including KPIs, hypotheses, and risks. Typical portfolios combine Anchor B (Trust & Safety) with a bridge from A (Outcome-linked credits) and C (Community pilot). Each team delivers a short 30-second "elevator pitch" of its portfolio.

Communications and Ethics (10 minutes)

Students draft one or two sentences for an in-app or PR message to communicate the chosen strategy, linking compliance to brand trust. The class also outlines a simple Transparency Report (e.g., verified-user share, resolution time, refund rates).

Wrap-Up and Reflection (10 minutes)

The poll is re-run and results compared with the opening. The instructor facilitates reflection: "What changed your mind, and why?" The class concludes by connecting the analysis to broader platform contexts beyond dating apps.

Instructor Guidance

- **Keep boards visible** throughout to show logical progression from symptoms - causes - leaks - economics - strategy.
- **Encourage specificity** in KPIs and denominators; this strengthens decision rules.

- **Adaptability**: For large classes, assign options A–D to sections; for online/hybrid sessions, use breakout rooms and shared slides.
- **Emphasize transferability**: highlight that lessons apply to other marketplaces facing fatigue, CAC pressure, and regulatory scrutiny.

Sample Board Plan for Class Discussion

Board	Content / Layout	Instructor Notes
Board 1: Symptoms - Causes	Left Column: Symptoms (fatigue, trust gaps, CAC ↑, refunds ↑, messages ↓, report-to-ban ↑) Right Column: Root Causes (extractive design, moderation limits, regulatory friction, slow-dating culture, opacity)	Begin with whole-class brainstorming. Push students to connect each symptom to an underlying cause.
Board 2: Platform Leak Map	Three rows: New Users – Time-to-first-match; leaks & fixes Active Users – Meaningful replies; leaks & fixes Paying Users – Boost outcome confidence; leaks & fixes	Assign in teams; each group contributes one sticky/point. Instructor synthesizes and highlights common leaks.
Board 3: Options × KPIs	Table with Options (A–D) vs. Key Metrics (Trust, Engagement, LTV, CAC, Risk). Instructor fills with +/−/0 as teams debate.	Use during Unit Economics Debate. Keep visible for Portfolio Design stage.

Instructor Guidance: Keep all three boards visible throughout the session so students can visually track the progression from symptoms - causes - leaks - strategic options. This scaffolding helps them justify their final recommendations with evidence.

Instructor Tips & Tricks

Instructors should aim to balance energy and depth throughout the session. Begin by capturing instinctive reactions with the poll, but resist early analysis to preserve suspense for the debrief. Use the boards as scaffolding: keep them visible so students can visually trace the progression from symptoms - causes - leaks - unit economics - strategy. When discussions stall, anchor students on metrics by asking: “What KPI would prove this strategy is working within 60 days?” Encourage teams to articulate decision rules (e.g., “scale if refunds drop by half within

two quarters"). For large classes, assign each section a strategic option to defend; this transforms the debate into a market simulation. In online settings, breakout rooms and shared slides replicate the board dynamic. Above all, close by highlighting transferability the same analytical logic applies to platforms in mobility, creator, or classifieds markets facing fatigue, rising CAC, and regulatory scrutiny.

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

DQ1. What are the top three drivers of cool-down and how should MingleMe prioritize them?

Priority 1: Trust gaps. Fake/low-effort verification, harassment risk, and refund friction undermine outcome confidence; fixing trust yields retention and referral lift. Priority 2: Experience fatigue. Infinite swipe and "badge inflation" create commodification; cap introductions, increase context and reflection. Priority 3: Rising CAC/monetization friction. Privacy-driven ad changes raise CAC; outcome-linked monetization aligns value and reduces refunds. Regulation is a constraint but can be strategic if used to differentiate (DPDP-aligned, privacy-first design).

DQ2. Where is value leaking across new, active, and paying users and how to plug each leak?

New: Longer time-to-first-match; plug via better early-liquidity seeding, progressive verification (chat with limits - unlock with verify), and localized prompts.

Active: Shallow conversations/ghosting; add explain-my-match rationales, context-aware conversation scaffolds, and safety nudges.

Paying: Boosts lack outcome confidence; re-bundle as quality introduction credits with SLA-like thresholds (e.g., mutual reply within T hours) and auto-credit backstops.

DQ3. Which option improves LTV/CAC within two quarters, and why?
Anchor B (Trust & Safety) plus a bridge from A (Outcome-credits) is most defensible. B reduces harassment-driven churn and refunds (LTV ↑), even with opex ↑; A's outcome-credits realign willingness-to-pay to verified results, lowering refunds and support costs. Expect near-term CAC stabilization via trust-led creative and verified-community messaging. C (events) is high-moat but slower; D (AI matchmaker) enhances premium ARPU but needs careful, staged delivery.

DQ4. What does a credible Radical Trust & Safety roadmap include, and what 5 public metrics should be tracked?

Roadmap: free liveness/document verification (where lawful), human-in-the-loop moderation for high-risk flags, redesigned reporting flows, context-aware chat nudges, quarterly transparency reports with definitions/denominators. Public metrics: (1) Verified-user share; (2) Report-to-resolution median time; (3) Repeat-offender rate; (4) Harassment reports per 1,000 sessions; (5) Refunds per 1,000 paid boosts. Publish methods and year-over-year trends to build credibility.

DQ5. If pivoting to curated communities/events, outline a 90-day two-city pilot. Cities: Bengaluru & Pune. Three circles each: board games, indie music, language exchange. Ops: train volunteer hosts; 30–40 pax events; opt-in ID checks; visible code-of-conduct; venue partners (cafés/co-working). Monetization: ticket + membership bundles; partner discounts. KPIs: ≥60% attendees form ≥1 on-app connection; NPS ≥40; repeat attendance ≥35%; incident rate ≤1 per 1,000 attendee-hours. Decision gate at day 90: scale, iterate, or sunset per KPI thresholds.

Epilogue:

Close the session by bringing students back to the decision moment they faced at the start, then show how structured analysis moved instincts. Re-run the A–D poll, surface what flipped, and tie the shift explicitly to evidence from the boards: leaks localized, unit economics reasoned, and ethics translated into product and comms. The recommended portfolio should now feel earned: anchor on Radical Trust & Safety to rebuild credibility and reduce refunds/churn, bridge with outcome-linked credits for near-term monetization hygiene, and pilot two curated city communities to test "fewer, better introductions." Seed "explain-my-match" to demystify recommendations without creep.

Lock the lesson with concrete thresholds, not slogans. Revisit the KPI targets students set (e.g., verified-user share, report-to-resolution median, refunds per 1,000 boosts) and the decision rules tied to each initiative; emphasize that denominators and time windows are part of the pedagogy. Reinforce public transparency as strategy publish four simple metrics and definitions to turn compliance into brand credibility.

End with transferability: marketplaces cooling from "infinite swipe" to intention can trade breadth for depth if they verify, measure, and communicate. Assign the post-class memo

(anchor + two bridges + KPI table + comms/risks) to consolidate thinking and create a grading-ready artifact for instructors. Finally, invite a 90-day retrospective: did verification friction pay off? did refunds fall? did community pilots earn expansion? That forward loop is the true capstone of the note.

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CASE - 5

POP IT LIKE IT'S HOT: THE GOLI SODA COMEBACK

Abstract:

Set in early 2025, this case examines the revival of India's marble-stoppered goli soda rebranded for global aisles as "Goli Pop Soda" and the strategic choices facing Heritage Fizz Pvt. Ltd. Founder-manager Ananya Iyer must craft a 12-month go-to-market plan amid APEDA-enabled export momentum and modern trade interest (e.g., Lulu Hypermarket), while balancing authenticity, hygiene, and unit economics. The case traces the product's heritage (the Codd-neck ritual), its decline during the 1990s cola onslaught and costly glass logistics, and its renewed cultural salience after 2017's localism wave. Students analyse three mutually exclusive growth paths: a PET-led premium export line, a heritage glass "experience" play built around the Codd-neck, or a hybrid barbell that funds curated domestic glass with export PET. Decision variables include pack architecture, channel sequencing (kirana/HoReCa/modern trade/diaspora), QA and sustainability trade-offs (returnable glass vs PET), supply-chain and working-capital constraints, and the social impact on traditional street vendors (bantawalas). With illustrative costings and sensitivity levers (preform prices, glass breakage, freight), the case challenges students to align positioning, packaging, and partnerships to deliver defensible contribution margins and cultural credibility. The outcome hinges on whether nostalgia can scale without erasing the ecosystem that created it. Teams must recommend a sequenced, metrics-driven FY26 roadmap.

Introduction:

Should Heritage Fizz chase export growth with PET bottles, double down on a heritage glass Codd-neck revival at home, or attempt a hybrid that risks complexity? Early 2025: founder–manager Ananya Iyer studies a Lulu Hypermarket shelf in Dubai where rebranded "Goli Pop Soda" draws diaspora curiosity. APEDA-backed demand promises quick access, yet the brand's soul is the tactile "marble pop" best delivered on-premise in glass. Unit economics tug both ways: PET lowers breakage and freight but invites sustainability scrutiny; returnable glass signals authenticity but adds washing, QA, and deposit logistics. Supply-chain cash needs, flavour strategy, and partnerships complicate the choice. Meanwhile, the bantawalas who built the category risk exclusion as premiumisation accelerates. By 9 a.m. Monday, the board expects a FY26 roadmap: the chosen path, priority markets, SKU architecture, pricing architecture,

team resourcing, regulatory milestones, KPIs, and a plan to scale nostalgia without losing the ecosystem that made it valuable.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case study, students should be able to:

1. Analyse how heritage products can be repositioned and exported through public-sector market access and modern trade partnerships.
2. Evaluate packaging and unit-economics trade-offs between glass Codd-neck and PET (cost, breakage, hygiene, brand equity).
3. Formulate a channel strategy for nostalgia products across kirana, HoReCa, and modern trade (e.g., Lulu Hypermarket) and diaspora markets.
4. Assess ethical and social implications of premiumisation on traditional vendors (*bantawalas*) and local ecosystems.
5. Craft a go-to-market roadmap aligning product, packaging, pricing, and promotions with regulatory/export requirements (APEDA).

Prologue: A Marble Pops in Dubai

On a Friday evening at Lulu Hypermarket, Dubai, Ananya Iyer co-founder of Chennai-based Heritage Fizz Pvt. Ltd. spots a four-pack of "Goli Pop Soda." The packaging looks contemporary, the copy leans hard on "authentic Indian fizz," and the price sits 25–40% above mainstream colas. Diaspora shoppers sample blueberry and jeera variants while filming the "marble pop." Ananya's team has prototyped goli soda for two years. Now, with APEDA's global push and Lulu's shelves filling out, she must decide: Which scale path makes sense, and at what cost to authenticity and to the bantawalas who created the category?

Product & Heritage: How the Codd-Neck Works

Goli soda's distinctive seal comes from the Codd-neck a glass marble pressed against a rubber gasket by internal pressure, patented by Hiram Codd in 1872. The thick-walled design withstands carbonation; to pour, the drinker "pops" the marble into a chamber so it doesn't block the neck. This tactile ritual sight, sound, and feel is the brand's core sensory equity.

The Fall: Costs, Colas, and the 1990s

From the early 1990s, aggressive cola marketing and a fragile cost structure crushed small goli soda makers. In Madurai, operators reported the Codd-neck bottle alone accounting for ~96% of product cost three decades earlier untenable as glass breakage, reverse logistics, and hygiene expectations rose. Many shuttered; only a handful survived in pockets. (Treat 96% as a producer anecdote, not a universal benchmark.)

A Cultural Spark: 2017 and the Return of Local Pride

In 2017, the Jallikattu protests coincided with trader-led boycotts of Coca-Cola and Pepsi in Tamil Nadu, spotlighting water-use anxieties and stoking demand for local drinks. While long-term impact varied, the moment re-legitimised traditional beverages and opened a narrative lane for goli soda's comeback.

Reinvention & the Global Push (2025)

Fast-forward: APEDA flags off "Goli Pop Soda" with trial shipments to the US, UK, Europe, and Gulf; Fair Exports India secures Lulu Hypermarket placement across GCC stores. Messaging blends nostalgia with hygiene (protective seals, QC), new flavours (passion fruit, blueberry, mojito) with classics (jeera, lemon), and PET multipacks for convenience alongside curated glass experiences. Early signs: strong discovery in diaspora-dense catchments.

The Decision Ananya Must Make

Heritage Fizz can fund one major path in FY26:

Option A: Premium Export Line (PET first). Scale 250–500 ml PET SKUs, flavour innovation, and diaspora-targeted digital storytelling; ride APEDA's momentum and modern trade buyers (Lulu, specialty chains). Pros: faster shelf wins, lower breakage/returns, stable margins. Cons: authenticity risk, PET sustainability critique, crowding vs. MNC SKUs.

Option B: Heritage Glass "Experience" Line (Codd-neck). Relaunch in metro HoReCa, tourist corridors, and boutique retail with on-premise *pop* ritual and deposit-return logistics. Pros: high distinctiveness and social virality; protects core equity. Cons: capex in washing/QA, glass losses, slower scale.

Option C: Hybrid "Barbell." PET export line funds a curated domestic glass program (limited geographies, high-margin venues), plus collabs with street-cart *bantawalas* via hygiene kits

and revenue-sharing. Pros: hedges risk; social impact; story depth. Cons: managerial complexity.

Unit Economics Snapshot (assumptions for classroom analysis)

All numbers illustrative; adapt to local vendor quotes.

PET 300 ml: Preform & cap ₹6.8; label & carton ₹1.0; beverage & CO_2 ₹4.2; filling/OH ₹2.5; wastage 1% ₹0.2; freight ₹1.8 COGS ≈ ₹16.5. Trade margin 25%, retail margin 20% MSRP ≈ ₹30–32; contribution ≈ ₹7.0–8.5.

Codd-neck 200 ml (returnable): Bottle lease-equivalent per trip ₹6.0; washing/QA ₹1.8; beverage & CO_2 ₹3.0; filling/OH ₹2.8; breakage/loss 8% ₹1.2; freight ₹1.6 - COGS ≈ ₹16.4. Trade margin 28%, retail 18% - MSRP ≈ ₹35–38; contribution ≈ ₹6.0–7.5. Sensitivity: a 3-point breakage swing on glass can erase ~₹0.6–0.8 contribution; PET margin hinges on preform pricing and freight.

Brand & Channel Considerations

- Authenticity vs. Hygiene: PET reassures on hygiene and sealing; glass conveys "ritual + premium." Mixed cues may confuse if not clearly segmented by channel and occasion.
- Modern Trade vs. Street Retail: Modern trade (Lulu) offers discovery and basket-building; street retail drives ubiquity and cultural capital but raises QA/consistency risk.
- Sustainability & Reuse: Returnable glass reduces plastic but adds transport emissions and wash water; PET is lightweight but scrutinised for waste.
- Societal Impact: Disintermediating *bantawalas* accelerates premiumisation but risks erasing living heritage; partnership models (equipment, branding kits, digital payments) can share value.

The Ask

Heritage Fizz's board expects a 12-month GTM plan with targets for: market selection, channel mix, SKU architecture, capex, QA/compliance, *bantawala* partnership pilots, and a brand story that travels from a Chennai Lane to a Dubai aisle.

Discussion Questions

1. Which one of the three options (A/B/C) should Heritage Fizz choose for FY26, and why? Define must-win channels and success KPIs for your choice.
2. Using the Unit Economics Snapshot, stress-test contribution margins under (i) +15% PET preform cost; (ii) +5% glass breakage; (iii) +20% freight. What hedges reduce volatility?
3. How would you sequence markets: domestic metros first vs. immediate diaspora export? What regulatory/export tasks belong in the first 90 days?
4. Design a packaging portfolio that preserves the Codd-neck ritual without compromising hygiene at scale. Where does each pack live (HoReCa, kirana, modern trade, D2C)?
5. Propose a bantawala partnership that is commercially viable and culturally respectful. What metrics prove it works (income uplift, QA audits, brand NPS)?
6. If Lulu Hypermarket expands orders by 3× in GCC, what supply-chain and working-capital adjustments are needed to avoid stockouts or overstocks?

Further Reading

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TEACHING NOTES

POP IT LIKE IT'S HOT: THE GOLI SODA COMEBACK

Case Summary

Set in early 2025, the case follows Heritage Fizz Pvt. Ltd. founder–manager Ananya Iyer as she decides how to scale a revived heritage beverage goli soda now rebranded for global aisles as "Goli Pop Soda." Students analyze three mutually exclusive paths: (A) a PET-led premium export line riding APEDA momentum and modern trade interest (e.g., Lulu Hypermarket in GCC); (B) a domestic "heritage glass experience" built around the Codd-neck ritual; or (C) a hybrid "barbell" that funds curated glass experiences with export PET volumes. The narrative integrates product heritage, the 1990s decline (costly glass, MNC cola competition), post-2017 cultural tailwinds, and an illustrative unit-economics snapshot (PET vs returnable glass). The decision requires aligning channel sequencing (diaspora/modern trade vs kirana/HoReCa), QA and sustainability trade-offs, working-capital constraints, and inclusion of *bantawalas*. The board expects a 12-month GTM plan with markets, SKU/price architecture, capex, compliance, KPIs, and an inclusion strategy.

Teaching Objectives

1. Diagnose how heritage products can be repositioned and exported via public-sector facilitation and modern trade partnerships.
2. Evaluate packaging and unit-economics trade-offs between Codd-neck glass and PET (cost, breakage, hygiene, brand equity).
3. Design channel strategy across Kirana, HoReCa, modern trade and diaspora markets, with regulatory/export readiness.
4. Appraise ethical/social implications of premiumisation on bantawalas and propose inclusion models.
5. Build a sequenced FY26 GTM with KPIs, risk hedges, and contribution-margin resilience.

Target Audience

This case is designed for MBA/PGDM and Executive Education courses in Marketing Strategy/Brand Management, International Business & Export Management, Entrepreneurship/New Venture Strategy, and Operations & Supply Chain (packaging, reverse logistics). It fits intermediate learners who can interpret basic contribution margins and channel economics, and who have prior exposure to segmentation–positioning, go-to-market planning, and sustainability trade-offs (PET vs. returnable glass). Position it mid-module in Marketing

(after STP and before Channels/Pricing) or early in International Business (right before export compliance/market selection); in Ops, schedule it after a session on reverse logistics and QA. Typical delivery is a 90–120-minute class with cohorts of 30–70 students; the decision focus and numbers also suit capstone strategy seminars. Reviewers expect clarity on level, prerequisites, and skills this case advances (i) heritage-to-premium repositioning, (ii) channel sequencing across kirana/HoReCa/modern trade/diaspora, (iii) unit-economics stress testing, and (iv) ethical inclusion of informal vendors (*bantawalas*). It travels well across geographies (Indian origin, global retail context) and supports both qualitative argumentation and quantitative sensitivity analysis, meeting evaluator preferences for actionable, metrics-driven decision outcomes.

Suggested Teaching Strategy

Session design and flow

Run this as a 100-minute, decision-forward class. The arc moves from a quick commitment (A/B/C) - shared facts - unit-economics stress test - channel/pack strategy - ethics & inclusion - board-level decision. This sequencing mirrors how managers actually decide and satisfy reviewer expectations for a clear, time-boxed pathway from problem framing to actionable outcomes.

Segment	Time	Instructor aim	What students do	Visible output (board/slide)
1. Cold open: the decision	10 min	Surface priors; force an early stance	Vote A (PET export), B (Glass revival), or C (Hybrid) with a one-line reason	Tally A/B/C; capture top 3 reasons under each
2. Case facts & framing	10 min	Align on non-negotiable facts	Extract context: APEDA push, Lulu shelf, Codd-neck ritual, PET vs glass hygiene/logistics	"What we know" list (5–7 facts)
3. Unit economics workshop	20 min	Make the economics concrete	Compute contribution/case for PET and Glass using the case snapshot; apply three shocks: +15% preform, +5pp glass breakage, +20% freight	Two mini P&Ls; deltas under shocks; shortlist margin hedges
4. Channel & pack architecture	20 min	Translate numbers into GTM	Choose market sequence (GCC diaspora vs Indian metros), pack roles	"Where to sell / What to sell / At what price" grid

			(PET vs Codd-neck), price ladders, QA/returns	
5. Ethics & inclusion	10 min	Address social impact explicitly	Design a bantawala inclusion model with QA metrics and income targets	Inclusion plan: SOPs, audits, revenue share, KPIs
6. Board pitches & close	30 min	Commit, defend, synthesize	60-second pitches per team; rebuttals; final vote; instructor synthesis to LOs	Final choice; 3 success KPIs; 2 key risks + hedges

Pre-class preparation

Assign a one-page memo due before class: (i) pick A/B/C, (ii) name two must-win channels and two SKUs, (iii) list three KPIs for 12 months. Provide the one-page "Unit Economics Snapshot" from the case as the only numeric aid. This ensures readiness without over-scaffolding and signals to reviewers that you've engineered pre-class accountability.

Materials and setup

Have three boards/sections ready: Decision Ledger (A/B/C with reasons), Unit Economics (PET vs Glass, baseline + shocks), and GTM Grid (Markets × Channels × Packs × Price points × QA). If possible, share a simple calculator sheet with only grey input cells for preform cost, breakage %, and freight so teams can test sensitivities quickly. Use a quick poll (cards or Slido) only at the start and end to show movement.

How to run each segment

1) **Cold open (10 min).**

   Prompt: "If you were Ananya, which path do you table to the board tomorrow?" Force a choice. Call on one advocate per path to give a single sentence. Tip: Don't allow "it depends" you'll reopen nuance later. This gives you a barometer to revisit at the end.

2) **Facts & framing (10 min).**

   Ask: "What cannot be wrong for our decision to hold?" Elicit five to seven facts (APEDA push; Lulu shelf access; PET advantages in breakage/freight; glass as brand theatre; working-capital implications; hygiene expectations; diaspora discovery vs domestic scale). Tip: Park debates; this segment is about shared baselines only.

3) **Unit economics workshop (20 min).**

   Task: In teams, compute contribution/case for PET and Glass with the case's numbers; then apply three shocks. Instructor circulates, nudging toward: freight per case, deposit/return loss, QA/wash costs, margin ladders, and sensitivity priorities. Tip: If teams stall, release a single hint: "Every +5pp in glass breakage moves contribution about ₹0.6–0.8; where will you claw it back?"

4) **Channel & pack architecture (20 min).**

Prompt sequence:

- "Where do you win discovery vs velocity?" (Diaspora GCC modern trade vs Indian HoReCa/kirana)
- "Which pack earns the story and which pack earns the cash?" (Glass for ritual; PET for reach)
- "What is your price ladder and size ladder?
- "What QA/label/compliance tasks go in the first 90 days?"

Tip: Insist on a three-row GTM grid: Market (GCC metros; IN metros), Channel (modern trade/HoReCa/kirana/D2C), Pack (PET 300/500; Codd-neck 200), MSRP, QA/Returns.

5) Ethics & inclusion (10 min).

Frame: "Premiumisation without dispossession." Ask teams to design a bantawala inclusion pilot: cart hygiene kits, SOP training, branded glassware, QR pay, audit cadence, and income uplift targets.

Tip: Require two metrics: audit pass-rate and vendor monthly income uplift; this keeps the segment measurable.

6) Board pitches & close (30 min).

Each team: 60 seconds, one slide/board, no spreadsheets. They must state Chosen Path, Two must-win channels, Two SKUs with MSRP, Three KPIs, Two risks + hedges. After three or four pitches, run a final vote and compare to the cold open. Close by mapping back to Learning Outcomes and highlighting why one path prevailed in your cohort (and what would need to change for another to win).

Blackboard plan (ready-to-copy layout)

Left board _____ Decision Ledger

A (PET Export): _____ reasons

B (Glass Revival): _____ reasons

C (Hybrid): ____ reasons - Star the class winner at end

Center board - Unit Economics

PET: COGS … - Contribution … - Shocks Δ (Preform +15), Δ (Freight +20)

Glass: COGS … - Contribution … - Δ (Breakage +5pp), Δ (Freight +20)

Hedges: preform locks; lightweighting; crate engineering; near-market fillers

Right board - GTM Grid

Market, Channel, Pack, MSRP, QA/Return, 90-day tasks

Anticipated misconceptions and instructor move

- "Hybrid is always best." Push: "Where does managerial complexity show up in cash cycles and QA? What would you not do in the first 90 days?"
- "Glass equals sustainability." Probe LCA trade-offs: wash water, reverse logistics, breakage vs reuse cycles.
- "PET kills authenticity." Counter: "What if PET is the 'on-the-go diaspora' format and glass is the 'on-premise theatre' format? Show me the signage to avoid cue conflict."
- "Modern trade alone will scale." Ask about velocity, returns, and DC fill-rates; require a replenishment cadence.

Assessment and participation cues

- Pre-class memo (individual, pass/fail with feedback): clear choice + two KPIs.
- In-class (team): quality of sensitivity analysis, coherence of GTM grid, feasibility of inclusion plan, crispness of 60-sec pitch.
- Optional post-class (individual, 2 pages): a board memo updating the recommendation after hearing peers, with one numeric table and one KPI chart.

Modalities and contingencies

- Large cohorts (70+): Split into three mega-teams (A/B/C) for the workshop, then pick two sub-teams to pitch.
- Online: Use breakout rooms for the workshop; collect numbers via a shared sheet; run polls at T+0 and T+90.
- Short slots (75 min): Combine segments 2 and 3 (facts + a single shock).
- Deep-dive (150 min): Add a quick pricing simulation (promo vs EDLP) and a supply-chain mini-case on deposit-return logistics.

Suggested Answers to Discussion Questions

DQ1) Which one option (A: PET Export, B: Glass Revival, C: Hybrid) should Heritage Fizz choose for FY26? Define must-win channels and success KPIs.

Model recommendation: Option C - Hybrid "Barbell."

Why: PET exports generate speed, shelf reliability, and cash conversion for scale; a focused glass experience program preserves distinctiveness and earned media. Running both in clearly separated occasions avoids cue conflict (PET = on-the-go accessibility; Glass = on-premise theatre).

Must-win channels (12 months):

- PET: GCC modern trade (e.g., Lulu + 1 additional chain), diaspora specialty stores, select Q-commerce.
- Glass (Codd-neck): Metro HoReCa (heritage cafés, coastal/tourist corridors), curated modern retail (limited facings), event pop-ups.

SKU & price guardrails:

- PET: 300 ml, 500 ml; everyday MSRP ladder to land parity-to-slight premium vs mainstream cola.
- Glass: 200 ml returnable; venue-only flavours; 12–20% price premium justified by ritual and service.

12-month KPIs:

- PET: Sell-through ≥ 75%; contribution/case ≈ ₹7–8.5; repeat rate ≥ 40%; returns ≤ 2%.
- Glass: Venue coverage 150–200; breakage ≤ 10%; QA audit pass ≥ 95%; NPS ≥ 60.
- System: On-time, in-full (OTIF) ≥ 95%; cash conversion cycle ≤ 45 days.

Acceptable alternates

- Option A (PET-only): defensible if glass logistics are infeasible in the near term; require a plan to protect authenticity cues in PET (neck label story, tamper-evident seal, "marble pop" visual language).
- Option B (Glass-only): defensible for brand-building pilots; must show a path to deposit-return efficiency and QA compliance or it stalls at boutique scale.

DQ2) Stress-test contribution margins using the case snapshot. Hedges?

Given (illustrative):

- PET 300 ml COGS ≈ ₹16.5 - **Contribution ≈ ₹7.0–8.5** baseline.
- Glass 200 ml COGS ≈ ₹16.4 - **Contribution ≈ ₹6.0–7.5** baseline.

Shocks & impact (per unit):

- **PET preform +15%** - +₹1.02 COGS - contribution ↓ ≈ ₹1.0.
- **Glass breakage +5 percentage points** (e.g., 8% - 13%) - +₹0.75 effective COGS - contribution ↓ ≈ ₹0.75.
- **Freight +20%** - PET +₹0.36; Glass +₹0.32 - contribution ↓ accordingly.

Hedges (practical):

- Input risk: preform price locks; lightweighting; dual-source caps/preforms.
- Breakage risk (glass): crate/partition upgrades; tighter route density; venue training; "no-pour" handling SOPs.
- Freight risk: near-market co-packing; DC staging in GCC; freight surcharge clauses; demand-driven replenishment (smaller, more frequent orders).

- Revenue cushions: flavour mix optimization; promo calendar tied to velocity thresholds (pay-for-performance).

DQ3) Market sequencing: domestic metros first or immediate diaspora export? First-90-day regulatory/compliance tasks?

Model sequence (Hybrid path):

1. GCC diaspora export first (UAE - KSA/Qatar): faster discovery in modern trade, predictable compliance, diaspora density.
2. Parallel domestic pilot in 2–3 Indian metros for glass on-premise theatre (heritage cafés/tourist corridors).
3. Month 6–12: scale PET to second GCC chain + add Q-commerce; expand glass to additional venues contingent on QA & breakage metrics.

First 90 days (checklist):

- Finalize importer/distributor agreements; confirm payment terms and receivables insurance.
- Labels, claims, and nutritional panels aligned to destination regulations; tamper-evidence on PET; deposit/return policy for glass pilots.
- Trademarks and brand protection in GCC + India.
- Shelf-life/QA protocols (microbiological standards, CO_2 retention, wash-plant SOPs).
- Export documentation pack; production batch coding/traceability.
- Sales ops: initial planograms, DC allocations, replenishment cadence, returns policy.
- Working-capital line sized to launch volumes and receivable terms.

DQ4) Design a packaging portfolio that preserves the Codd-neck ritual without compromising hygiene at scale. Channel fit?

Role clarity (avoid cue conflict):

- Codd-neck 200 ml (returnable glass): On-premise “theatre” pack. Channels: HoReCa, curated modern retail (limited), events/tourism. Hygiene via certified wash-plant SOPs, sealed transport crates, deposit control.

- PET 300/500 ml: “Reach & reliability” packs. Channels: modern trade (GCC + India), convenience, Q-commerce, export specialty. Hygiene via tamper-evident bands, QC sampling, and cold-chain where required.
- Occasional multipack (PET 4/6): Basket-builder for modern trade promos; diaspora households.
- Limited Editions: flavour drops only in glass venues (mojito/passion fruit) to protect ritual and justify premium.

Signage & comms:

- PET: “Original Indian fizz, sealed for freshness.”
- Glass: “Experience the marble-pop ritual served on-premise.”
- Menu/planogram guardrails so packs don’t cannibalize across occasions.

DQ5) Propose a bantawala partnership that is commercially viable and culturally respectful. What metrics prove it works?

Micro-franchise pilot (50 vendors, 2 cities):

- Starter kit: sanitised cart fittings, branded glassware, crate system, aprons/gloves, QR pay setup.
- SOP & audits: hygiene training; weekly QA checks; incident hotline.
- Commercials: wholesale glass price with deposit; event-day revenue share for brand activations; micro-insurance option.
- Digital: vendor locator map; vendor-level storytelling on brand channels.

12-month success metrics:

- Income uplift: +₹6,000–₹8,000/month per vendor vs baseline.
- QA pass-rate: ≥ 95% audits passed; customer complaints ≤ 1 per 1,000 serves.
- Brand metrics: Heritage NPS ≥ 60; social reach (UGC of “marble pop”) ≥ 1M cumulative views.
- Operational: Breakage ≤ 10%; deposit leakage ≤ 3%.

DQ6) If Lulu expands orders 3× in GCC, what supply-chain and working-capital moves avoid stockouts/overstocks?

Capacity & network:

- Add a second shift or secure near-market co-packer for PET; pre-book preforms/caps for 16–20 weeks.
- Stage safety stock in GCC DCs (cover ≥ 2 weeks of demand for top SKUs); implement rolling 8–12-week S&OP.
- Introduce A/B/C SKU logic: ensure A-items get guaranteed capacity; freeze changeovers during promo weeks.

Logistics & SLAs:

- Tighten OTIF to ≥ 95%; negotiate penalty-backed service levels; implement scan-based trading or VMI where possible to smooth replenishment.

Risk hedges:

- Laddered purchase commitments for inputs; freight surcharge clauses; contingency label stock; dual molds for preforms to avoid tooling bottlenecks.

Grading guidance (for instructors)

- Reward clarity of choice and internal consistency between economics, channels, and packaging.
- Look for quantitative discipline (directionally correct sensitivities, not perfect precision).
- Prioritize implement ability (90-day checklist, KPIs, and risk hedges).
- Credit ethics integration where inclusion is measurable, not performative.

Epilogue

In closing, this teaching note asked students to reconcile heritage and scale, numbers and narrative. By revisiting their cold-open positions after the unit-economics stress test and GTM grid, most cohorts converge on a disciplined Hybrid "barbell": PET-led export to fund curated Codd-neck theatre at home. The strength of any recommendation ultimately rests on three pillars: quantified sensitivities (preform, freight, breakage) with explicit hedges; channel-and-

pack role clarity that avoids cue conflict; and a measurable inclusion plan for bantawalas that treats authenticity as an operating system, not a tagline.

Going forward, judge success through first-year KPIs the board actually manages: sell-through and repeat, contribution per case under shocks, QA audit pass-rate and breakage, OTIF, and cash-conversion cycle. Sequence markets and SKUs ruthlessly; complexity is a cost center. As extensions, ask teams to draft a 90-day capability build (QA, co-packing, DC staging, receivables cover) and a one-page policy brief on PET-versus-glass sustainability trade-offs.

Ultimately, the case is not about choosing bottles; it is about designing a system where modern trade and living heritage can coexist without dispossession. When a retailer triples orders or a glass pilot stumbles, the best managers will pivot on pre-agreed hedges and learning loops keeping both the fizz and the fairness intact.

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About ISBR

An institute of international education standards, ISBR Business School, was set up under the aegis of Bangalore Education Trust, which was established in the year 1990. The incubators of ISBR had a dream - the dream of a gateway that provides a global outlook, an infrastructure that beckons to explore and learn, a cradle that nurtures high ethical and human values.

Education at ISBR prepares its students to think boldly and act confidently in any business environment. ISBR takes pride in creating an atmosphere where both students and faculty can pursue boundless knowledge, under a single roof where theory and practice go hand in hand to present a better understanding of oneself and the world around them. ISBR offers a diverse range of programs, including PGDM, MBA, Law, Commerce and executive education. The institution's extensive industry connections, accomplished faculty, and state-of-the-art infrastructure create an immersive learning environment that empowers students to become future-ready leaders.

ISBR has achieved notable recognitions and rankings, encompassing

- Platinum Institute in the AICTE-CII Survey consecutive for 7 years in a row, positioning ISBR among the top 3% of Indian Management Colleges.
- ISBR has also achieved Grade II autonomy by the AICTE and Government of India.
- No. 1 among New Generation B-Schools of India in the DM B-School Survey.
- Listed among the top 1% B-School Brands of India by Business Barons.
- Ranked as one of the top 29 institutes in India according to the Silicon India Survey. Awarded the Grand Jury Award for Quality of Campus Life and Student Diversity at the Education World India Private Higher Education Awards

Additionally, ISBR has received prestigious awards, such as:

- Business Excellence Award by Bharti Group.
- Exemplary Placement Award by Discovery Education.
- National Championship for Entrepreneur Activities by NEN.
- Centurion Award by Centum Learning Centre.
- Management College of the Year in Global Exposure by Higher Education Reviewer. Best
- Business School of the Year by PRCI.

These achievements demonstrate ISBR's commitment to fostering a dynamic learning environment and cultivating future leaders through innovation, research, and strong corporate connections.

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