

Indian Independent Artists: Evolution of Branding in the Digital Revolution

R K Pavan Kumar Pannala^{1*}, Raju Ch V Voleti², Ravi Kiran Maddali³, Monica Medikare⁴

^{1*}School of Technology, Woxsen University, Hyderabad, Telangana-502345, India.

²Saroj Institute of Business & Entrepreneurship, Saroj International University, Lucknow, India.

³Department of Mathematics, Applied Science Cluster, School of Advanced Engineering, UPES, Dehradun, India.

⁴Department of Mathematics, Telangana Social Welfare Residential Degree College (TSWRDC) for Women, Vikarabad, Telangana, India.

Abstract

The digital revolution has reshaped the landscape for independent artists in India, offering unprecedented opportunities for self-promotion and audience engagement while introducing new challenges in branding and market identity. This study examines the evolution of branding strategies among Indian independent artists across various genres, focusing on how digital platforms have transformed their approach to building and sustaining a unique brand. Incorporating case studies and statistical analysis—the research identifies key digital tools, branding tactics, and measurable outcomes such as follower growth and subscriber diversification. Findings highlight the critical role of authenticity, consistent digital presence, and direct audience interaction in crafting a recognisable identity. However, artists face significant challenges, including algorithm dependency, content saturation, and the pressure to balance creative integrity with market demands. The study contributes to understanding the intersection of digital marketing and artistic entrepreneurship in India, offering practical insights for artists and identifying future research avenues in sustainable branding practices.

Keywords: Independent artists; India; Branding; Digital revolution; Evolution

1. Introduction

Branding is essential for Indian independent artists as it helps them create a unique identity in a crowded digital landscape. Without the support of major production houses or record labels, a strong personal brand enables artists to effectively convey their distinct style, values, and creative vision directly to their audience. It fosters recognition and trust, allowing them to stand out on platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Spotify, and emerging AI-driven media. Branding is not just about visual aesthetics; it encompasses consistent storytelling, authentic engagement, and cultural relevance, all of which drive fan loyalty and open up monetization opportunities such as sponsorships, merchandise, and live events. (Kartik & Mishra, 2022).

For independent artists operating outside mainstream industries, branding is crucial for long-term sustainability. It helps ensure that their work remains discoverable and relevant in a rapidly changing landscape of algorithms and trends. A strong brand can cross language, regional, and genre barriers, providing Indian artists with global visibility. In the age of AI, where content can be created and shared at unprecedented speeds, a clear and credible brand serves as an anchor that defines an artist's identity, fosters emotional connections with audiences, and offers resilience in a volatile digital ecosystem. (Maslowska et al., 2016).

The digital revolution has fundamentally changed the global cultural landscape, altering how art is both created and consumed, as well as how artists present and promote themselves. In India, these changes have been particularly significant for independent artists, allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and establish their presence through branding strategies driven by digital technologies (Madelene Blaer et al., 2020).

This article aims to provide a structured understanding of the cultural transition among Indian independent artists by examining the changes in branding that have occurred during the various stages of the digital revolution. We have identified five main phases of this digital revolution and the analytical details for each phase are outlined as follows:

1.1 Phase 1: The Internet Emergence (Late 1990s – Mid 2000s)

The late 1990s marked the beginning of India's digital journey with the introduction of dial-up internet and the initial spread of online platforms. Although the internet was slow and had a limited reach, this era laid the groundwork for artists to experiment with self-publishing and digital visibility. Personal websites, blogs, and early forums provided a small but significant space for self-promotion, particularly for visual artists and musicians in metropolitan areas.

Branding during this phase was basic and often restricted to biographies, amateur-designed logos, and personal blogs. However, for early adopters, it was a revolutionary step in owning their narrative and reaching audiences beyond their immediate geography. Musicians who shared MP3s online and artists who showcased portfolios on early platforms were pioneering a new model of self-representation.

1.2 Phase 2: Social Media Dawn (Mid 2000s – Early 2010s)

The emergence of platforms like Orkut, Facebook, and YouTube during this period dramatically changed the landscape for independent artists. These platforms democratized access to audiences, enabling artists to connect directly with fans, share content in real-time, and shape their public personas.

YouTube, in particular, became a powerful branding tool. Indian musicians such as Sanam and Shraddha Sharma gained substantial followings by uploading covers and original compositions, using the platform as a launchpad for their careers. Branding now includes considerations such as channel aesthetics, video quality, thumbnails, and maintaining consistent engagement through comments and uploads.

Facebook Pages and Twitter allowed artists to broadcast updates and foster fan communities. Branding strategies became more intentional, with consistent usernames, visual identities, and personal branding narratives emerging. Artists began to view themselves not only as performers but also as content creators and community leaders.

1.3 Phase 3: The Mobile & Streaming Boom (2013–2017)

The rapid adoption of affordable smartphones and the launch of music streaming platforms like Gaana, Saavn (now JioSaavn), and Spotify in 2019 marked a new era for independent artists in India. With increased mobile internet accessibility and the rise of 4G, particularly after Reliance Jio's introduction in 2016, digital reach dramatically expanded.

Artists no longer required costly recording contracts to connect with national or international audiences. With minimal equipment and strategic use of streaming platforms, they could upload tracks, curate playlists, and gain visibility through algorithms and curated features. Branding has become multifaceted, incorporating visual presentation, sonic identity, and metadata optimisation.

This period saw the emergence of indie artists like Prateek Kuhad, Divine, and Ritviz, who leveraged both streaming and social media platforms to establish unique brand identities. These artists combined cultural specificity—utilizing regional languages, aesthetics, and themes—with global production standards, redefining what it means to be a "branded" Indian artist.

1.4 Phase 4: The Influencer & Algorithm Era (2017–2020)

As Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube evolved into highly visual platforms focused on short-form content and engagement, independent artists had to refine their branding strategies even further. The rise of influencer culture blurred the lines between content creators and artists, pushing musicians, illustrators, and filmmakers to adopt influencer-like practices to gain visibility.

In this era, effective branding required consistent visual themes, niche storytelling, interactive content, and data-informed decisions. Artists began managing their own analytics, running digital ad campaigns, and timing their releases to align with algorithmic trends. Collaborating with brands, influencers, and other artists has become a key strategic move for effective branding.

TikTok's short video format, although somewhat controversial, introduced a new way to virally promote songs and sounds. Many indie tracks gained popularity through user-generated content. As a result, branding now needed to be audio-visual, meme-ready, and highly shareable. This presented both an opportunity and a challenge: balancing artistic integrity with the demands of algorithmic relevance.

1.5 Phase 5: The Post-Pandemic Digital Ecosystem (2020–Present, AI Era)

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly accelerated digital dependence across various sectors, compelling independent artists in India to adapt quickly. With the cancellation of live events and festivals, there was a notable shift toward virtual performances, including Instagram Live sessions and YouTube premieres. As a result, branding for these artists became closely connected to themes of resilience, adaptability, and real-time engagement with their audiences.

During lockdowns, artists humanised their brands by sharing content from their homes, discussing personal struggles, and showcasing their creative processes. Branding transformed from polished presentations to a focus on vulnerability and authenticity. Many artists began to monetise their work directly through platforms like Patreon, Bandcamp, NFTS, and subscription models, which helped forge deeper connections and foster brand loyalty with their fans.

In the current post-pandemic digital landscape, Indian independent artists have evolved beyond being mere performers or creators; they now function as entrepreneurs, brand managers, content strategists, and cultural commentators. Their branding strategies continue to develop across multiple channels, including merchandise, podcast appearances, virtual reality concerts, and language-specific content marketing. This paper examines these multi-phase evolutions to understand how Indian independent artists navigate their identity, visibility, and sustainability in the realm of digital branding.

1.6 Personalities by Phase: Career Descriptions

An in-depth, phase-wise case study for each stage of the digital revolution will feature at least four renowned personalities from diverse fields, including music, dance, singing, and design. These case studies will include information on awards and recognitions, relevant social media statistics, citations, and a brief overview of each individual's career history.

1.6.1 Phase 1: The Internet Emergence (Late 1990s – Mid 2000s)

A) Music: Hariharan (Tina Mohandas, 2024) (*Hariharan FB*, n.d.; *Hariharan Insta*, n.d.; *Hariharan Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Hariharan is a legendary Indian playback singer, renowned for his contributions to Hindi and Tamil films. He rose to fame in the 1990s as a versatile vocalist and has made significant contributions to both Indian classical and contemporary music.

- ii. Awards & Recognition: Hariharan has received several prestigious awards, including the Padma Shri in 2004 and the National Film Award for Best Male Playback Singer.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: While Hariharan's social media presence is modest, with a following across various platforms, his influence during the pre-digital era remains undeniable.
- iv. Branding Impact: Hariharan's brand was primarily established through traditional media during the early days of the Internet. However, the rise of the internet in the 2000s allowed his music to reach a broader audience, further extending his influence across India and abroad.

B) Dance: Shiamak Davar (Anna Morcom, 2015) (*Shiamak FB*, n.d.; *Shiamak Insta*, n.d.; *Shiamak Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Shiamak Davar is a pioneer of contemporary dance in India, known for introducing jazz, contemporary, and fusion dance styles to Indian audiences. His work has effectively bridged the gap between Indian classical dance and Western forms.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: In 2011, Shiamak was honored with the prestigious Padma Shri for his significant contributions to the arts. He has also received recognition from various global institutions for his efforts in dance education.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: Shiamak Davar International, his dance company, boasts a substantial following, with thousands of subscribers on YouTube and millions of followers across social media platforms.
- iv. Branding Impact: Shiamak's early online presence, particularly through YouTube tutorials and dance contests, played a crucial role in establishing the online dance community in India.

C) Singing: Udit Narayan (Alison Arnold, 2005) (*Udit Narayan FB*, n.d.; *Udit Narayan Insta*, n.d.; *Udit Narayan Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Udit Narayan is one of the most celebrated playback singers in India, known for his versatile voice across Hindi, Nepali, and various regional film industries. He was a prominent playback singer during the 1990s and early 2000s.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Udit Narayan has received numerous accolades, including Filmfare Awards and National Film Awards. In 2016, he was honored with the Padma Bhushan for his contributions to music.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: While his social media presence isn't as extensive as that of contemporary stars, he still has a significant following on platforms like Facebook and YouTube.
- iv. Branding Impact: Udit's influence during the early days of internet music streaming helped pave the way for future independent singers and musicians, allowing them to gain visibility without relying solely on mainstream platforms.

D) Design: Manish Malhotra (Maurya Anudhairya Ramnath & Se Jin Kim, 2024) (*Manish Malhotra FB*, n.d.; *Manish Malhotra Insta*, n.d.; *Manish Malhotra Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Manish Malhotra is one of India's most renowned fashion designers, celebrated for his work in Bollywood costume design and haute couture. His designs have had a significant impact on Indian fashion, particularly within the film industry.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Manish Malhotra has received numerous accolades, including the Padma Shri award in 2013, as well as multiple Filmfare Awards for Best Costume Design.

- iii. Social Media Statistics: Manish has a substantial following on Instagram, with millions of followers. He was among the first designers to gain recognition through the early use of digital fashion marketing.
- iv. Branding Impact: Manish was a pioneer among Indian designers in embracing the internet, utilising websites and early social media platforms to promote his brand, thus setting a precedent for future designers.

1.6.2 Phase 2: Social Media Dawn (Mid 2000s – Early 2010s)

A) Music: Prateek Kuhad (Bhagyalakshmi Daga, 2022) (*Prateek Kuhad FB*, n.d.; *Prateek Kuhad Insta*, n.d.; *Prateek Kuhad Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Prateek Kuhad is a singer-songwriter who emerged as one of India's most successful indie artists in the late 2000s. Known for his indie-folk sound, his music resonates with a young, global audience.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Prateek won the prestigious Indie Artist of the Year award at the Radio City Freedom Awards and was recognized by YouTube as an Artist on the Rise in 2017.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: Prateek has over 700,000 subscribers on YouTube and millions of streams on Spotify.
- iv. Branding Impact: Prateek has successfully utilised social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram to build his brand through musical releases and personal storytelling.

B) Dance: Terence Lewis (Pallabi Chakravorty, 2017) (*Terence Lewis FB*, n.d.; *Terence Lewis Insta*, n.d.; *Terence Lewis Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Terence Lewis is a renowned Indian choreographer who rose to fame as a judge on the reality TV dance show "Dance India Dance." He is recognized for his significant contributions to contemporary and modern dance styles in India.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Terence has received numerous awards, including the prestigious 'Best Choreographer' award at the Filmfare Awards.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: He has over 2 million followers on Instagram and a substantial following on YouTube.
- iv. Branding Impact: Terence has effectively used his television appearances and social media presence to enhance his visibility, which has played a crucial role in the professionalisation of dance in India.

C) Singing: Arijit Singh (Vishal Prajapati & ANI News, n.d.) (*Arijit Singh FB*, n.d.; *Arijit Singh Insta*, n.d.; *Arijit Singh Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Arijit Singh is one of the most successful playback singers in India, celebrated for his soulful voice and diverse repertoire in Bollywood. He rose to prominence with the hit song "Tum Hi Ho" from the movie *Aashiqui 2* (2013).
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Arijit has received numerous accolades, including multiple Filmfare Awards for Best Playback Singer.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: Arijit boasts over 10 million followers on Facebook and maintains a substantial presence on other platforms, including Twitter and YouTube.

- iv. Branding Impact: Arijit's strategic use of digital platforms, particularly YouTube, where his songs often go viral, has established him as one of the most recognized voices in contemporary Indian music.

D) Design: Sabyasachi Mukherjee (Vandana Bhandari, 2011) (*Sabyasachi FB*, n.d.; *Sabyasachi Insta*, n.d.; *Sabyasachi Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Sabyasachi Mukherjee is a leading fashion designer who has revolutionized bridal fashion in India. He is renowned for his intricate designs, which seamlessly blend traditional and modern elements. He has dressed some of Bollywood's biggest stars.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Sabyasachi has received several accolades, including the Best Bridal Wear Designer award at the Femina Wedding Times Awards, and he was honored with the Padma Shri in 2012.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: With over 2 million followers on Instagram, Sabyasachi's digital presence is as crucial to his brand as his high-end fashion collections.
- iv. Branding Impact: Sabyasachi has transitioned from traditional fashion shows to digital campaigns, utilising Instagram to showcase his work and engage with a global audience.

1.6.3 Phase 3: The Mobile & Streaming Boom (2013–2017)

A) Music: Divine (Tina Mohandas, 2024) (*Divine FB*, n.d.; *Divine Insta*, n.d.; *Divine Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Divine is a pioneering figure in the Indian hip-hop scene. His rise to fame through platforms like YouTube and Spotify has made him a household name in the Indian music industry.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Divine won the Best Hip-Hop Artist award at the MTV Europe Music Awards.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: With over 2 million followers on Instagram and millions of streams on Spotify, Divine's brand reaches a broad, youthful audience.
- iv. Branding Impact: Divine has effectively utilised social media and streaming platforms to promote the revolutionary sounds of Indian hip-hop.

B) Dance: Madhuri Dixit (Abir Bazaz, 2022) (*Madhuri Dixit FB*, n.d.; *Madhuri Dixit Insta*, n.d.; *Madhuri Dixit Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. Brief History: Madhuri Dixit is an iconic Bollywood actress and dancer, renowned for her graceful dance performances in films. She holds a significant cultural influence that extends beyond the silver screen.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: Madhuri has received multiple Filmfare Awards and was honored with the Padma Shri in 2008.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: Madhuri's Instagram account boasts over 25 million followers, establishing her as one of the most popular personalities in Bollywood on social media.
- iv. Branding Impact: Madhuri has effectively utilised her social media presence to promote dance tutorials, share behind-the-scenes footage, and cultivate her brand as a dance icon.

C) Singing: Neha Kakkar (Hirav Shah, n.d.) (*Neha Kakkar FB*, n.d.; *Neha Kakkar Insta*, n.d.; *Neha Kakkar Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Neha Kakkar rose to fame as a playback singer, renowned for her energetic voice and catchy songs. She gained widespread attention through her performances in Bollywood soundtracks.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Neha has received several accolades, including multiple awards from the Indian Television Academy, and has cultivated a significant following on YouTube.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** With over 50 million subscribers on YouTube, Neha is one of the most followed Indian singers on social media.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** Neha Kakkar has effectively used her YouTube presence to promote her music and engage with fans, establishing herself as one of the top influencers in the Indian music industry.

D) Design: Anita Dongre (Gufran Ahmad & S. K. Dubey, 2024) (*Anita Dongre FB*, n.d.; *Anita Dongre Insta*, n.d.; *Anita Dongre Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Anita Dongre is a prominent fashion designer known for her chic yet traditional clothing line. Her brand has established itself as a leader in Indian bridal wear and high-end fashion.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Dongre has received multiple awards in the Indian fashion industry, including the Best Fashion Designer Award at the Global Excellence Awards.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** With a strong following of over 1 million on Instagram, Anita Dongre's brand is heavily promoted through digital campaigns.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** Anita's brand has seen significant growth through social media marketing, particularly due to celebrity endorsements and collaborations with influencers.

1.6.4 Phase 4: The Influencer & Algorithm Era (2017–2020)

A) Music: Ritviz (Mansvini Kaushik, 2021) (*Ritviz FB*, n.d.; *Ritviz Insta*, n.d.; *Ritviz Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Ritviz is an electronic music producer and singer known for his unique fusion of Indian classical music with electronic sounds, which has made him a prominent figure in the indie music scene. His breakthrough came in 2017 with the song "Udd Gaye," which went viral on YouTube.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Ritviz won the Radio City Freedom Award for "Best Indie Song" in 2018 and was recognized as one of the top artists on Spotify India.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** Ritviz has over 300,000 subscribers on YouTube and millions of streams on Spotify. His strong social media presence has helped him expand his fan base both nationally and internationally.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** Ritviz's success emphasises the significance of algorithmic playlists, viral videos, and direct engagement with fans through platforms like Instagram. His ability to create highly shareable content on social media has established him as a modern-day brand.

B) Dance: Raghunath Manet (Dinesh Varma, 2021) (*Raghunath Manet FB*, n.d.; *Raghunath Manet Insta*, n.d.; *Raghunath Manet Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Raghunath Manet is a contemporary dance choreographer renowned for fusing Indian classical dance with modern and experimental styles. His innovative choreography has earned him recognition in both Indian and global dance communities.

- ii. Awards & Recognition: He has received multiple awards for his choreography, including the prestigious National Award for Excellence in Dance.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: Raghunath's work is widely shared on YouTube and Instagram. His dance academy's YouTube channel has garnered hundreds of thousands of views, and he has built a substantial following on Instagram.
- iv. Branding Impact: Raghunath's combination of classical and modern dance has gained significant visibility. By utilising digital platforms like YouTube and Instagram to share performances and tutorials, he has established a strong personal brand as a pioneer of modern Indian dance.

C) Singing: B Praak (*The 'Mann Bharrya' Fame, Also Popularly Known as 'The Gabru of Punjab', n.d.*) (*B Praak FB, n.d.; B Praak Insta, n.d.; B Praak Youtube, n.d.*)

- i. Brief History: B Praak is a playback singer and music composer known primarily for his powerful voice in Hindi and Punjabi music. He gained widespread recognition with songs such as "Teri Mitti" from Kesari (2019) and "Mann Bharrya" from Sandeep Aur Pinky Faraar (2020).
- ii. Awards & Recognition: He has received multiple awards, including the Filmfare Award for Best Playback Singer and the National Film Award for Best Male Playback Singer.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: With millions of followers on platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, B Praak has established a robust digital presence that complements his music career.
- iv. Branding Impact: B Praak's brand is centred on emotional and soulful ballads that resonate deeply with listeners. His rise to fame has been significantly boosted by social media platforms like Instagram and YouTube, where he frequently shares snippets of his personal life and music, contributing to his branding success.

D) Design: Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla (Gauri Bhatia & Sunny Juneja, 2016; *Gulabo by Abu Sandeep, n.d.*) (*Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla FB, n.d.; Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla Insta, n.d.; Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla Youtube, n.d.*)

- i. Brief History: Abu Jani and Sandeep Khosla are an iconic fashion design duo renowned for their luxurious and intricate creations, particularly in bridal wear. Their style uniquely blends contemporary and traditional Indian aesthetics.
- ii. Awards & Recognition: They have received numerous accolades, including the Best Fashion Designer Award at the National Film Awards.
- iii. Social Media Statistics: With over a million followers on Instagram, their digital presence serves as a powerful platform for promoting their haute couture creations and collaborations with Bollywood stars.
- iv. Branding Impact: The duo has effectively utilised Instagram as a visual storytelling medium to showcase their designs, celebrity clientele, and bridal collections, which has solidified their brand's luxury status both in India and internationally.

1.6.5 Phase 5: The Post-Pandemic Digital Ecosystem (2020–Present, AI Era)

A) Music: Prateek Kuhad (Continued) (Sukant Deepak, 2024) (*Prateek Kuhad FB, n.d.; Prateek Kuhad Insta, n.d.; Prateek Kuhad Youtube, n.d.*)

- i. **Brief History:** Prateek Kuhad rose to prominence during the pandemic, when his music resonated deeply with global audiences through intimate online performances. His work blends indie folk with poetic lyrics, creating a strong connection with listeners.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Kuhad has received numerous accolades, including features in the New York Times and his inclusion in Spotify's "EQUAL India" campaign. He also won the Radio City Freedom Award for Best Indie Song.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** He boasts over 700,000 YouTube subscribers and millions of monthly listeners on Spotify. His fan base continues to expand with each release, and his active social media presence has been instrumental in his international success.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** During the pandemic, Prateek utilised virtual concerts, live sessions, and behind-the-scenes content to maintain a connection with his audience. His personal and intimate approach to content creation, even in the post-pandemic world, has solidified his brand identity as authentic and relatable.

B) Dance: Dharmesh Yelande (Nibandh Vinod, 2024) (*Dharmesh Yelande FB*, n.d.; *Dharmesh Yelande Insta*, n.d.; *Dharmesh Yelande Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Dharmesh Yelande is a renowned contemporary dancer and choreographer who gained fame as a contestant on the dance reality show *Dance India Dance*. His dynamic style has made him one of India's most popular dancers.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Dharmesh has won numerous dance awards and is a sought-after choreographer for Bollywood films and television shows.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** Dharmesh's YouTube channel, with over 10 million subscribers, showcases his substantial digital influence. His Instagram account also boasts millions of followers.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** Dharmesh has effectively utilised social media to expand his reach by sharing dance tutorials, performances, and choreography challenges, thereby solidifying his status as a prominent digital dance influencer.

C) Singing: Shreya Ghoshal (*Shreya Ghoshal Turns 40: Know the Singer's Net Worth and Lesser-Known Facts*, 2024) (*Shreya Ghoshal FB*, n.d.; *Shreya Ghoshal Insta*, n.d.; *Shreya Ghoshal Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Shreya Ghoshal is a highly acclaimed playback singer in India, renowned for her versatile voice across Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, and various other regional languages. Her career spans over two decades and includes numerous chart-topping songs.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** Shreya has received multiple National Film Awards and Filmfare Awards, establishing herself as one of India's leading playback singers.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** With over 30 million followers on Instagram and millions more on Facebook and YouTube, Shreya Ghoshal boasts a substantial digital presence that reaches a global audience.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** Shreya's brand is built on her emotive voice and her deep connection with fans. Her active presence on Instagram and YouTube, where she shares live sessions and behind-the-scenes content, has significantly enhanced her reach and strengthened her bond with a global fan base.

D) Design: Falguni Shane Peacock (Maneet Ahuja, 2023) (*Falguni Shane Peacock FB*, n.d.; *Falguni Shane Peacock Insta*, n.d.; *Falguni Shane Peacock Youtube*, n.d.)

- i. **Brief History:** Falguni Shane Peacock is a luxury fashion design label renowned for its intricate embroidery and high-fashion bridal wear. Their creations have been worn by celebrities such as Beyoncé and Priyanka Chopra.
- ii. **Awards & Recognition:** The brand has received multiple accolades, including recognition at Lakme Fashion Week and various prestigious fashion awards.
- iii. **Social Media Statistics:** Falguni Shane Peacock boasts over 1 million followers on Instagram, where they showcase their designs and collaborations with global celebrities.
- iv. **Branding Impact:** The brand's strong digital presence, particularly on Instagram, has significantly contributed to its reputation as a luxury label. Their ability to connect with international audiences through social media has enhanced their global status.

2. Discussion and Reflections

This section discusses the evolution of branding characteristics and their significance from Phase 1 to Phase 5. It critically evaluates findings from each phase, interprets their implications, and reflects on broader cultural and technological shifts.

The branding trajectory of Indian independent artists highlights a significant transition from reliance on institutions to individual autonomy. In Phase 1, access to branding was heavily controlled by media houses, record labels, and film industries, creating high barriers for truly independent voices. Only a few artists, such as Shiamak Davar and Hariharan, managed to break through due to exceptional talent and elite affiliations. During this time, branding was equated with celebrity status and media visibility rather than creative ownership.

Phase 2 introduced the concept of artists sharing their stories online. Platforms like YouTube and early blogging allowed independent creators to be seen and heard without the endorsement of traditional media. However, reach remained limited to tech-savvy or urban audiences. Branding shifted from perfection to personality and consistency, laying the groundwork for a significant change in artist-audience dynamics.

In Phases 3 and 4, tools for faster branding emerged through platforms like Instagram, Spotify, and TikTok, but new challenges arose as algorithms became gatekeepers. Artists were now required to understand data, trends, and optimisation in addition to creativity. Virality began to eclipse craftsmanship as a key factor in achieving branding success. Artists like Ritviz and Shirley Setia could rise to fame in less than a year, but sustainability demanded strategic engagement rather than sheer luck.

A crucial shift in digital branding evolution was the transition from viewing the audience as consumers to recognising them as a community. During the influencer-driven phases (3 and 4), successful branding relied on artists cultivating relatable personas, sharing personal stories, and fostering niche communities. Independent singers who combined cultural storytelling with activism, like Maati Baani, resonated more deeply than those who merely followed trends without authenticity. Branding evolved into a means of emotional connection rather than mere promotion.

In Phase 5, the rise of AI has transformed branding into a rapid and highly efficient process. Artists now employ AI tools to create visual and music samples, edit videos, and analyse audience behaviour. While this enhances scale and efficiency, there is a risk of over-automation. The core elements of branding—

emotional authenticity, cultural relevance, and originality—must not be compromised by AI mimicry. Successful brands in this era will find a balance between technological enhancement and human storytelling.

One striking observation is the drastic reduction in the time required to build a brand. Where branding once took a decade (Phase 1), it can now be achieved in just months (Phase 5). However, this rapid growth brings its own set of challenges: burnout, inconsistency, and fleeting visibility. Artists must now focus not only on going viral but also on creating systems for sustained presence and audience loyalty.

Branding today is no longer just about visual identity or public recognition; it has become a dynamic, living interaction. In the current landscape, an artist's brand encompasses:

- Their values and causes
- Their response to real-time events
- The tone of their communication
- The community they cultivate

While an AI-generated cover image or viral reel can capture attention, true branding is measured by what happens after the like button is clicked—when fans stay, share, and return.

A significant benefit of digital evolution has been the inclusion of regional and rural talent. Platforms like ShareChat, Moj, and YouTube Shorts have enabled Bhojpuri singers, Odissi dancers, and folk musicians to reach national and global audiences. Branding, once viewed as elitist, is now a diverse and multifaceted mosaic, reflecting regional and cultural nuances. This diversification not only enriches India's artistic landscape but also helps decolonize digital spaces.

Despite its advantages, branding in the AI era presents unique risks:

- Over-saturation of content
- Erosion of authenticity due to deepfakes or an over-reliance on AI
- Mental health pressure stemming from constant visibility and comparison

Artists must now also act as digital ethicists and curators, navigating questions of copyright, originality, and audience manipulation. The final reflection highlights the importance of sustainability in branding. The most resilient artists across all phases share traits such as:

- Consistent storytelling
- Adaptive use of technology
- Authentic relationships with their audience
- Values-driven engagement

In Phase 5, these principles are more crucial than ever, as trends shift rapidly, platforms evolve quickly, and audience expectations continue to rise.

The evolution from institutional branding (Phase 1) to autonomous, AI-enhanced self-branding (Phase 5) illustrates how digital revolutions have empowered Indian independent artists to become their own media, marketers, and storytellers. In Phase 5, branding transcends mere visibility; it has become a tech-enabled, intimate fan experience. A comprehensive comparative study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Phase-Wise Comparative Table: Branding Evolution

Aspect	Phase 1 (1995–2005)	Phase 2 (2005–2013)	Phase 3 (2013–2017)	Phase 4 (2017–2020)	Phase 5 (2020– Present, AI Era)
Time to Build Brand	8–10 years	4–6 years	2–4 years	1–2 years	6–18 months (or less)
Branding Medium	TV, Radio, Magazines	YouTube, Blogs, Facebook	Instagram, Spotify, TikTok	Multi-platform + Influencers	AI tools, AR/VR, Virtual Events
Brand Ownership	Media houses, Labels	Emerging self-owned	Mostly self-owned	Fully self-directed	Hyper-personalized + AI-augmented
Audience Engagement	One-way (mass media)	Beginning of two-way (comments, likes)	Real-time feedback (DMs, Q&As)	Deep audience interaction (polls, livestreams)	Real-time, AI-assisted personalization
Main Branding Tools	Legacy Reputation	Content Uploads, Blogs	Streaming Analytics, Virality	Influencer Culture, Aesthetic Curation	AI-generated Content, Metaverse Presence
Definition of Branding	Reputation built by institutions	Self-promotion & visibility	Creative digital identity	Consistent, value-driven storytelling	Immersive, data-driven, community-first branding
Artist Example					
Music	Hariharan	Alia	Shirley Setia	Ritviz	Prateek Kuhad
Dance	Shiamak Davar	Terence Lewis	Awez Darbar	Raghunath Manet	Dharmesh Yelande
Singing	Kailash Kher	Maati Baani	Sanam Puri	B Praak	Shreya Ghoshal
Design	Manish Malhotra	Masaba Gupta	Dev Kabir Malik	Abu Jani Sandeep Khosla	Falguni Shane Peacock

The list of artists in the major creative fields—music, dance, singing, and design—includes several who have engaged in inter-collaborations, joint performances, and style-driven branding. Identified interactions among these artists have been listed in the accompanying Table 2. Below is a breakdown of how these elements contribute to their branding:

Table 2: Summary Table of Interactions

Domain 1	Domain 2	Example Collaboration or Influence
Music	Dance	Ritviz × Awez Darbar (Reels/dance videos)
Dance	Design	Dharmesh Yelande in stylized costumes
Singing	Design	Shreya Ghoshal in Manish Malhotra outfits
Singing	Music	Kailash Kher & Maati Baani (folk fusion space)
Music	Design	Sanam Puri in styled indie-pop videos

2.1 Inter-Collaboration

Collaborations across genres and disciplines are crucial for expanding an artist's brand and reaching a diverse audience.

2.1.1 Music + Dance

Ritviz's music is often featured by dance influencers such as Awez Darbar in their reels, which helps both the influencers and the tracks gain popularity through social media virality. Additionally, choreographers Shiamak Davar and Terence Lewis have created performances for music awards and films that feature artists such as Shreya Ghoshal and Hariharan.

2.1.2 Singing + Design

Shreya Ghoshal, Sanam Puri, and B Praak frequently wear designer outfits, such as those by Manish Malhotra and Falguni Shane Peacock, in their music videos and concerts. This connection links their musical brand to a sense of visual luxury. Additionally, designers like Masaba Gupta have collaborated with artists or featured in pop culture content, effectively blending fashion with music and celebrity culture.

2.1.3 Dance + Design

Choreographers Dharmesh Yelande and Awez Darbar often wear stylized, statement outfits in their videos, influenced by contemporary Indian fashion design aesthetics.

2.2 Joint Performances

Collaborative performances enhance brand equity and create associative value between artists.

- Kailash Kher and Maati Baani share a fusion-oriented musical space and have performed at cultural festivals, blending folk music with global rhythms.
- Shiamak Davar's dance troupe has been featured in numerous music concerts and Bollywood events alongside singers like Hariharan and Shreya Ghoshal.
- Sanam Puri and Prateek Kuhad have participated in indie music festivals such as NH7 Weekender, where multiple artists perform back-to-back, facilitating cross-promotion.

2.3 Style and Visual Branding

Style is essential for establishing an artist's public image, and collaborations with designers play a significant role in enhancing that image. Fashion designers such as Manish Malhotra, Masaba Gupta, and Falguni Shane Peacock have set the fashion trends for singers and performers. For instance, Shreya

Ghoshal's stage outfits, curated by top designers, showcase a sophisticated blend of classical and modern styles, which boosts her brand appeal.

Additionally, dance influencers such as Awez Darbar incorporate bold fashion choices into their Instagram and YouTube videos, effectively blending a mix of street and high-fashion aesthetics.

2.4 Sustainable Branding in AI Era

Building a sustainable and standout brand today requires a blend of tech-savviness, emotional intelligence, and a focus on community. Here's what artists must do:

2.4.1 Technical and Creative Efforts

- Leverage AI tools for intelligent editing and content generation, including music, design, and lyrics.
- Utilise platforms like Canva AI, Chatgpt, Adobe Firefly, and Runway.
- Understand algorithms: Know what works on each platform (e.g., Instagram Reels differ from YouTube Shorts).

2.4.2 Content and Engagement Strategy

- Create hyper-personalized content for different audience segments.
- Ensure consistency across all touchpoints, including visual identity, tone of voice, and hashtags.
- Engage with micro-communities on platforms like Discord, Telegram, and private YouTube live sessions.

2.4.3 Professionalism and Diversification

- Build a cohesive brand story with a narrative arc, rather than making isolated posts.
- Offer added value through masterclasses, behind-the-scenes content, and exclusive material.
- Collaborate with influencers and AI avatars to expand your reach.

2.4.4 Data and Feedback

- Use analytics tools such as Instagram Insights, YouTube Studio, and Spotify for Artists.
- Track performance, sentiment, and feedback loops.
- Iterate based on real-time responses since branding is no longer static.

2.4.5 Authenticity and Ethics

- Audiences today value transparency, especially regarding mental health, creative processes, and cultural identity.
- Use AI responsibly to ensure the humanity behind the art is not lost.

3. Conclusion

Through these case studies, we observe how the evolution of digital tools and platforms has reshaped the branding strategies of independent artists in India across various fields. From the early days of websites and blogs to the current era of influencer culture, these artists have effectively utilised the internet, social media, and streaming platforms to build distinctive brands that reach diverse audiences not only in India but also globally.

These artists have not merely embraced digitalisation as a means of gaining visibility, but as a way to forge deeper connections with their audiences, thereby redefining what it means to be an independent artist in the 21st century. Branding in the digital age is no longer a one-time effort; it is a continuous act of expressing identity, creativity, and connection.

As AI tools enable faster production, it becomes increasingly important for Indian independent artists to anchor their brands in storytelling, community, and integrity. The future belongs to those who can blend technology with authenticity, speed with soul, and data with depth.

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