



# Strategic Potential of Consumer Cooperatives in Competitive Retail Space: A Case of Warana Bazar, Maharashtra

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## Abstract

Consumer Cooperatives are democratically managed enterprises catering to members' consumer goods and service needs. They engage in retailing, wholesaling, and sometimes consumer goods production. However, challenges tied to governance, operations, and management professionalism have strained their efficacy. Particularly post-liberalization, Indian consumer cooperatives faced complexity amid customization demands. The emergence of a modern competitive marketplace necessitated adaptation. Warana Bazar, a pioneering rural cooperative in Maharashtra, navigated these challenges, ensuring sustained growth. This case study documents their journey, spotlighting success factors. The balanced scorecard and strategic maps assess cooperative competitiveness and socioeconomic potential in the Twenty-first Century.

**Keywords** Consumer cooperatives · Warana Bazar · Balanced scorecard · Strategic map · Retail marketing

**JEL Classification** L81 · P13 · Q13 · M21

## Introduction

Consumer cooperatives, encompassing diverse retail outlets such as supermarkets and convenience stores, prioritize service provision over profit, extending benefits to members and non-members through reasonable pricing strategies (Tripathy et al., 2021). These voluntary organizations, democratically managed by consumers, engage in various operations, including retailing, wholesaling, and, on occasion, producing and processing consumer goods (Minnehametova et al., 2022). Profits generated are directed towards fulfilling the cooperative's mission, ensuring continuity in production or

service delivery during crises to meet the needs and well-being of its members (Peattie, 2020; Tripathy et al., 2022).

Consumer cooperatives exhibit a competitive spirit, embedded within local communities and part of a global movement, actively supporting their values and communities (Shantz et al., 2020; Siva Prakasam and Rajamohan, 2001). The evolution of consumer cooperative enterprises aligns with sharing economy trends and collaborative consumption initiatives, with members assuming dual roles as owners and customers (Paliwal et al., 2021).

Our paper explores Warana Bazar's prominent growth as a consumer cooperative model, emphasizing the urgent need for a comprehensive understanding of these enterprises and their sustainable competitiveness and resilience. The significance of this study lies in addressing the paucity of academic research on consumer cooperatives in India. The existing body of literature is notably underdeveloped, emphasizing the critical need for a more comprehensive understanding of these enterprises and their sustainable competitiveness in the Indian context. Building upon this foundation, the adoption of the Business Model Canvas underscores Warana Bazar's commitment to understanding its business ecosystem and delivering value to diverse stakeholders. The study seeks to analyze Warana Bazar's comprehensive approach to meeting

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stakeholder needs and fostering growth while identifying critical success factors for sustainable competitiveness.

## Literature Review

Momaya (2015) defines competitiveness as a process that enhances assets and processes to improve performance, serving as a balancing mechanism alongside traditional functions. Competitiveness involves an organisation's effective positioning within its industry to gain advantages over competitors (Vasiliev, 2022). It entails offering distinct advantages that align with stakeholders' expectations and needs, leveraging unique resources to outperform competitors, and enhancing competitiveness (Paliwal et al., 2024).

## Governance and Business Strategy Approach

Cooperatives play a transformative role in rural economies, contributing to national progress (Centenaro & Laimer, 2017). Effective governance practices are crucial for cooperative growth, as they bolster economic and social well-being (Hussain, 2000). Upholding governance principles like participation, transparency, and accountability directly contributes to competitiveness (Jain et al., 2020; Paliwal et al., 2023). Member engagement is pivotal, influencing cooperative dynamics and competitiveness (Raj Kumar Patra, 2015). Attributes such as satisfaction, trust, and commitment among members amplify cooperative success and competitiveness. Thus, governance emerges as a foundation for enhancing competitiveness within consumer cooperatives (Momaya, 2018).

Cooperatives' adaptability to shifting retail landscapes and provision of tailored services to diverse demographics bolster competitive strength (Dubhashi, 2012). Cooperative marketing structures benefitting farmers underscore the significance of balanced business approaches to competitiveness (Ajitabh and Momaya 2004; Moharir, 2012). Upholding member welfare, financial stability, and ethical practices are prerequisites for long-term competitiveness (Rajaraman & Sivakumar, 2013).

Operational Excellence, cost control, and resource management are key imperatives for competitive cooperative growth (Misra, 2002). Leveraging management competence and adopting a multi-business approach enhance operational efficiency, driving the competitive advantage of consumer cooperatives. Strategies focusing on innovation, financial prowess, and integration further amplify cooperative competitiveness (Momaya, 2019).

## Strategic Competitive Models

The balanced scorecard (BSC) is a strategic tool for assessing organizational performance and competitiveness, catering to diverse stakeholders, including universities (Kaplan and Norton 2001; Inamdar et al., 2002). Employing four perspectives—Financial, Customer, Internal Process, and Learning and Growth—the BSC tracks progress toward strategic goals, facilitating a balanced competitive approach (see Fig. A1 given in Appendix in a separate supplementary file).

Management strategies are pivotal in pursuing organizational competitiveness, focusing on modeling strategies to enhance competitiveness (Ajitabh and Momaya 2004). The Asset-Process-Performance (APP) framework integrates resources and processes to drive performance, offering a comprehensive tool to link competitiveness with strategy.

Innovative organizations leverage frameworks like APP and BSC to translate strategic objectives into key performance indicators (KPIs), aligning strategies with measurable outcomes. The framework's performance measurement complements traditional methods by incorporating customer-centric, internal process, innovation, and improvement perspectives linked to the institution's strategic vision (Ali, 2007). Both frameworks prioritize creating value for stakeholders and offer organizations a holistic approach to achieving sustainable competitive advantage.

## Methodology

The presented study adopted a qualitative approach. The study examined the cooperative using various data collection methods over time. The research team conducted in-depth telephonic interviews with 30 primary cooperative stakeholders in December 2022, engaging in discussions lasting 30–45 min. These interviews delved into the cooperative's sustainable practices and marketing initiatives, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of its strategies.

A thorough literature review supports the analysis. The case study methodology is employed to investigate the cooperative's operations, aligning with the unit of analysis—Merriam (1988) and Yin (2009) define the unit of analysis for this study as the organization and its active participants. The study utilizes strategic analysis frameworks such as the BSC and APP Framework to evaluate the cooperative's strategic potential. Outcomes include the development of a comprehensive business model using the business model canvas, offering insights for strategic decision-making.

## Warana Bazar: Case Study

### Background

*“The ‘Wired Village’ project has significantly impacted our community. It has improved access to information and services, empowering and bringing us closer together.”*  
*Primary Stakeholder.*

Established in 1976, Warana Bazar is the first rural consumer cooperative store, contributing significantly to the transformation of retail dynamics in Kolhapur and the surrounding rural areas. Its mission of providing quality goods at reasonable prices with friendly service has been a cornerstone of its success. The name Warana, derived from the Warana River in Kolhapur and Sangli district, reflects the store’s commitment to the local community.

Situated in Warana Nagar, Kolhapur, the roots of this cooperative movement extend to the founding of the Shree Warana Cooperative Sugar Factory in 1956. Over time, it has evolved into the country’s premier cooperative sugar factory, serving as a catalyst for socioeconomic development and uplifting the base of the pyramid in the region. The factory has expanded its influence, giving rise to numerous co-employed units such as Warana Dairy, Cooperative Bank,

Cooperative Bazaar, and various educational, cultural, and social initiatives.

At the helm of these strategic initiatives was the late Shri. Tatyasaheb Kore’s vision, tireless efforts, and ethical contributions propelled Warana into a regional development model. Shri Kore’s leadership, marked by a solid commitment to social responsibility and duty, has played a pivotal role in deepening Warana’s cooperative movement, earning recognition as one of the nation’s exemplary cooperatives.

The success of Warana Bazar has not only transformed the retail landscape in Kolhapur but has also set a precedent for cooperative stores across Maharashtra, Goa, and other states. Despite encountering significant obstacles, the growth of Warana Bazar is detailed in this case study, shedding light on the factors that have enabled consumer cooperatives (See Fig. 1), particularly in rural areas, to remain competitive and thrive.

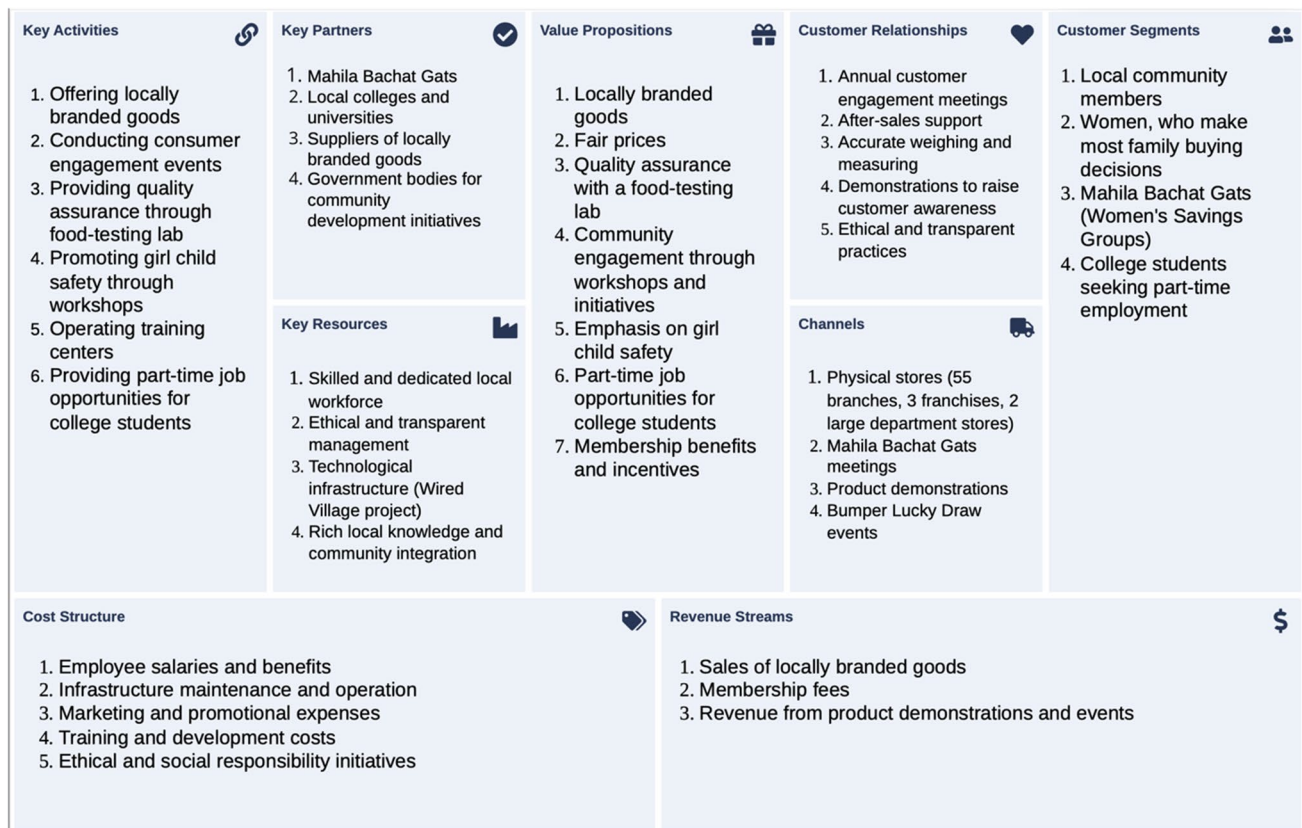
### Application of Balanced Score Card at Warana Bazar

#### Financial Measures

*Key strategies:* Consistent financial performance to be maintained. Social outcomes to be delivered without compromising on economic goals in consumer markets.

Strategy Map for Balance Scorecard		Objectives	Measures	Initiatives
Financial		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Profitability</li> <li>Improved Cost Structure</li> <li>Increased</li> <li>Asset Utilization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Member Satisfaction and Retention</li> <li>Total Revenue Growth</li> <li>Cost Reduction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Develop personalized member engagement programs.</li> <li>Launch new revenue-generating services</li> <li>Implement cost-saving initiatives</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>High customer value proposition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Availability</li> <li>Quality</li> <li>Attractive Discounts &amp; Pricing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Improve inventory management</li> <li>Implement quality improvement programs</li> <li>Develop dynamic pricing strategies</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operational Efficiency</li> <li>Quality Product &amp; Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Customer Relationship Management</li> <li>Innovation Processes</li> <li>Strategic Sourcing &amp; Procurement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enhance CRM systems and training</li> <li>Establish cross-functional innovation teams</li> <li>Optimize supplier relationships</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organisational Growth</li> <li>Community Development</li> <li>Truly Democratic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Teamwork</li> <li>Employee Engagement</li> <li>Skill development for employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Promote team-building activities</li> <li>Implement employee engagement initiatives</li> <li>Offer skill development workshops</li> </ul>

Fig. 1 Strategy map and balanced scorecard of Warana Bazar (Autho Leadership, which emphasizes continuous rs Compilation)



**Fig. 2** Business model canvas

**Metrics:** Despite fierce competition in a globalized economy, Warana Bazar boasts a yearly turnover of Rs. 150 crore, supported by 618 employees and 28,000 members, of which 80% are women. With 55 branches, 3 franchises, and 2 large department stores, the bazaar serves 118 villages, achieving a daily turnover exceeding Rs. 40 lakhs and maintaining profitability. Sales increased to 168 crore after a decline in 2019–20, indicating the cooperative's resilience amid challenges (see Fig. A2. Financial Highlights in Appendix). The turnaround suggests the cooperative's ability to adapt and thrive in the face of challenges as captured in the Business Model Canvas (see Fig. 2).

**Stakeholder A:** "As a long-time member of Warana Bazar, my overall experience has been excellent. The cooperative's consistent financial performance can be attributed to their commitment to offering quality products and competitive pricing."

### Customer Measures

**Key Strategies:** Warana Bazar aims to maximize customer satisfaction, retention, and market share growth by providing top-quality products and services.

**Stakeholder I:** "Warana Bazar stands out for its focus on customer satisfaction and continuous improvement. They actively seek customer feedback, incorporating it into their strategies and offerings."

**Metrics:** The process of selecting customer-perspective metrics in the BSC involves identifying target customer segments and determining the measures to evaluate customer-perspective performance. It hinges on addressing two fundamental questions: Who are the target customers, and what is the value proposition? While seemingly straightforward, many organizations encounter challenges in answering these questions. The choice of a value proposition entails selecting one of three "disciplines":

Operational Excellence, which prioritizes low prices, convenience, and efficiency. Examples include Wal-Mart and "Big Bazaar" in the Indian context.

- Product Leadership, which emphasizes continuous innovation and providing high-quality products.
- Customer Intimacy focuses on fostering long-term client relationships through a deep understanding of their needs. Warana Bazar, for instance, engages with customers annually to gain insights into their preferences.



*Customer-Centric Initiatives by Warana Bazar:* Warana Bazar adopts a comprehensive

business model by offering locally branded goods with daily store hours from 10 am to 7 pm at fair prices. They support mahila bachat gats, host consumer meetings, and implement initiatives like product demonstrations and the Bumper Lucky Draw. The establishment prioritizes quality assurance with a food-testing lab, features Warana Brand Cottonseed oil, and promotes girl-child safety through regular workshops. In addition, they operate a training center, provide part-time jobs to college students, and use various incentives to boost membership and staff trust, including an 8% rebate during festivals and 10% cash rebate coupons for year-round use. (see Fig. A3 in Appendix).

*Stakeholder J:* “The positive impact of Warana Bazar goes beyond retail. Their social initiatives, like supporting women’s welfare and education, demonstrate their dedication to the community’s well-being.”

Warana Bazar demonstrates ethical and social responsibility toward its customers by ensuring timely delivery of high-quality products, offering after-sales support, maintaining accurate measurements, and raising customer awareness about malpractices. Employees exhibit dedication and devotion, contributing to social and ethical values. In addition, it hires widows as employees as part of its social and moral commitment to the community.

### Internal Business Process Measures

*Key strategies:* Innovative and ethical approach for creating value for all the stakeholders, participatory management, operational efficiency, and customer relationship management.

**Metrics Governance practices:** The board consists of 15 members, including 9 men and 6 women, convening regularly with total attendance. In 2019, most individual and associate members were women, reflecting the cooperative’s commitment to gender diversity and inclusivity.

*Membership growth:* One-share membership costs Rs. 500, with growing membership driving Warana Bazar’s expansion (see Fig. A4 in Appendix).

*Committee structure:* Various committees, including Purchase, Staff, Branch, Meeting, Audit, Recovery, and Franchise, contribute to the cooperative’s governance structure.

*Incorporating member development culture:* Understanding the diverse lifestyle, socioeconomic, and cultural needs of members and the community is essential for effectively setting and achieving innovative goals.

*Female membership:* 80% of Warana Bazar members are women, highlighting the cooperative’s unique and ethical approach and commitment to inclusivity and gender equality.

*Stakeholder D:* “I like the cooperative’s focus on women’s empowerment. Warana Bazar values women’s participation in decision-making and provides equal opportunities.”

*Ethics:* Warana Bazar’s management demonstrates integrity and competence, operating without political influence. Monthly meetings are held among directors and subcommittee members to ensure transparency. The organization adopts a voluntary approach to meeting sales targets, with performance-based pay reflecting its commitment to social, ethical, and economic responsibility.

*Stakeholder E:* “Warana Bazar operates with ethical principles at its core. The transparency maintained, the absence of political influence, and the regularity of board meetings all build stakeholder trust.”

*Human Resources:* Six hundred sixty-five employees across all branches, predominantly from nearby Warananagar villages. Staff benefits include 34 days of leave, 3 months of maternity leave, on-the-job training for college students, Medclaim and personal accident insurance (Rs. 50 lakhs) for all staff and family members, workers’ welfare trust, gratuity trust, uniforms, performance incentives, bonuses, provident fund, pension scheme, and house rent allowance. The bazaar employs professional management techniques such as per-person-per-day sales to avoid overstaffing, optimize space utilization through per square foot sale, maintain a stock turn rate of more than 15 times, achieve break-even points promptly, ensure employee expense percentages remain below 55% of gross profit, source products directly from manufacturers, and maintain minimal inventory levels.

*Technological Development:* The Wired Village project exemplifies how I.T. infrastructure can bolster socioeconomic development in Kolhapur and Sangli. They were initiated in 1998 by the PM’s Office I.T. Task Force. The project aimed to enhance sugar cane cooperative productivity and offer information and services to 70 Warana villages. It provides localized information on crops, agricultural market pricing, Maharashtra government jobs, and education to villages. The project also facilitates I.T. center remote learning, land record digitalization, and integration of all cooperative business centers.

### Learning/Growth (People) Measures

*Key strategies:* Hire, develop, and maintain appropriate resources to achieve the mission, vision, strategic intent, and objectives.

**Metrics Training and development:** The Vilasrao Tatyasaheb Kore Consumers Co-op Training Centre, established in 1996, aims to recruit skilled workers. Sales personnel undergo a month-long training program annually, endorsed by NABARD and Shivaji University in Kolhapur. Warana Bazar accepts the first ten students of each batch. The center

**Table 1** Integrated model for strategic competitiveness at Warana Bazar

Perspective	Balanced scorecard (BSC)	Asset-process-performance (APP)
Financial	Consistent turnover profitability	Skilled local workforce, ethical management practices
Customer	High satisfaction and retention Targeted customer segments value proposition	Innovative technological initiatives, community integration
Internal processes	Good governance, operational-efficiency metrics	Emphasis on participatory management, talent recruitment
Learning/growth	Continuous learning, ethical practices	Dedicated training centre, employee benefits
Assets	Financial stability, market presence	Focus on H.R., firm culture, technology
Process	Strategic, operational, marketing processes	Emphasis on strategic management, H.R., technology
Performance	Strong financials, market expansion	Optimal resource utilization, continuous learning

Source: Authors compilations

has provided training for Maharashtra and Goa cooperative stores since 1996. In addition, many cooperative bazaars offer consultancy and in-store training to promote consumer cooperatives. To enhance retail management, 16 officers attended training in Japan, while 9 received training in Singapore/Malaysia and Sri Lanka. A Warana Bazar mobile van raises awareness about food adulteration through the “AshiBhesal ashichalakhi” campaign.

*Activities for employees by Warana:* Each employee contributes 12% towards P.F., LIC group gratuity, 5% toward pension, 25% towards bonus, and 12.5% toward incentives, in addition to participating in MediClaim, Personal Accident Insurance, and the work cooperative society. Warana Bazar promotes employee and customer health through yoga/pranayama workshops while their training center recruits new staff. Applying ICA cooperative principles, including voluntary and open membership, democratic governance, member involvement, economic participation, equitable profit distribution, cooperative cooperation, and cooperative education, underscores the bazaar’s dedication to addressing local concerns.

*“Warana Bazar’s employee incentives and benefits are highly valued. They create a positive work environment, and the cooperative’s support extends beyond work, making us feel part of a close-knit community.” - Stakeholder F.*

Strategy Map links the objectives to the balanced scorecard and APP (see Table 1), which provides a roadmap giving direction and linking the performance indicators and initiatives to the strategy of the cooperative. As shown in the Fig. 1 above, there is a set of objectives for each perspective. Measures within the scorecard framework are aligned to the purposes and targets set. An action plan is linked to the goals along with an associated budget. The above matrix and study highlight that even though there has been tremendous progress in the functioning of Warana Bazar over the years, its growth in terms of finance and membership has been dormant. In the rapidly changing retail landscape, the consumer cooperative must rethink its strategic approach to retail marketing to harness resources to build

core competencies and gain a competitive advantage against organized retail business.

## Findings

The findings presented in the study are derived from a comprehensive analysis of the BSC and telephonic interviews conducted with primary stakeholders of Warana Bazar Consumer Cooperative. The analysis reveals several noteworthy aspects of the cooperative’s performance. Financially, Warana Bazar demonstrates consistent profitability, reflected in a yearly turnover of Rs. 150 crore and a robust customer base. The cooperative’s customer-centric approach, characterized by high-quality products, fair pricing, and active customer engagement through annual meetings and product demonstrations, contributes to remarkable customer satisfaction and retention.

Ethical management practices ensure transparency and accountability, exemplified by the absence of political interference and regular board meetings. Moreover, the cooperative’s commitment to employee welfare is evident through various incentives, benefits, and training programs. The research identifies critical success factors for Warana Bazar Consumer Cooperative, suggesting actionable strategies for sustained growth. Building on its customer-centric approach, the cooperative can innovate through technology, implementing online platforms and personalized loyalty programs. Strategic marketing initiatives, including targeted campaigns and collaborations, can expand its customer base. Sustainability practices, employee development programs, and technological integration, exemplified by the “Wired Village” project, contribute to operational efficiency and community welfare. Further, diversification strategies and collaborative partnerships offer avenues for adapting to market trends and strengthening local ties. These strategies collectively position Warana Bazar for continued success in the evolving business landscape.

The findings emphasize the competitive advantage of Warana Bazar Consumer Cooperative, while acknowledging the need for adaptability and addressing challenges to ensure sustained growth in an ever-evolving business landscape.

## Implication of the Study

The study significantly contributes to the theoretical understanding of consumer cooperatives by shedding light on the intricate relationship between cooperative governance, management strategies, and business competitiveness. It advances existing literature by providing empirical evidence of how the principles of governance and ethical management practices within consumer cooperatives, as exemplified by Warana Bazar, contribute to their sustained competitiveness. The research supports and extends theoretical frameworks related to cooperative economics, emphasizing the need for these organizations to adapt and innovate in response to changing market dynamics. Furthermore, the study enriches theoretical discussions by highlighting the role of leadership, ethical practices, and the alignment of cooperative values with market demands in shaping the success and resilience of consumer cooperatives.

The study effectively demonstrates the adaptability and resilience of consumer cooperatives in the face of challenges posed by the entry of large private companies into the retail sector. The study further demonstrates the potential for cooperative department stores to play a pivotal role in rural markets and bridge the gap between consumer behavior and market liberalization. The adoption of the BSC at Warana Bazar signifies a strategic shift toward holistic performance management, enhancing decision-making, and fostering sustainable growth through comprehensive performance monitoring.

## Conclusion

The concluding remarks emphasize the challenges and opportunities facing consumer cooperatives, particularly in the context of increasing competition from large private companies entering rural and urban retailing. Despite potential implementation problems highlighted, consumer cooperatives, exemplified by the success of Warana Bazar, have demonstrated resilience in protecting consumers and thriving as strong businesses.

The Warana Bazar case highlights the need for adaptation in the face of changing market dynamics, urging consumer cooperatives to rethink their role in the value chain, explore new store formats, and leverage leadership, management, and ethical practices to drive transformative change in rural lifestyles. The success of Warana Bazar is attributed to its commitment to quality, transparency, accountability,

integrity, and sustainability, aligning with diverse market needs. The strategic initiatives rooted in ethical leadership and good governance have positioned consumer cooperatives like Warana Bazar for stability and success in the evolving retail landscape, presenting a crossroads of tradition and transformation poised to shape retail Excellence in future.

## Key Questions Reflecting Applicability in Real Life

1. How can consumer cooperatives effectively compete against large private retailers entering rural and urban markets, leveraging their constraints to maintain an edge?
2. Amid changing preferences and market dynamics, how can cooperatives like Warana Bazar tap into rural markets and reshape strategies for competitiveness?
3. Facing private retailer challenges, how can consumer cooperatives reposition in the value chain, adopt innovative formats, and integrate tech trends for competitive advantage?
4. What lessons does Warana Bazar's success teach about ethical leadership, innovation, and governance-driven strategies for competitive growth?
5. To remain relevant, how can consumer cooperatives balance tradition and transformation for enduring retail Excellence?

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**Data Availability** The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

**Material Availability** Materials used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest** The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

**Informed Consent** Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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