

A Comparative Study of Consumers Preference for Perishable Products in Maharashtra's Urban and Rural Markets

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates and compares consumer preferences for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra, India, focusing on three key dimensions: quality and freshness, health and nutrition awareness, and packaging and presentation. The objectives of the study are to identify any 'significant difference' in preferences between urban and rural consumers and to provide recommendations for businesses and policymakers based on the findings. A sample of urban and rural customers from various localities in Maharashtra was surveyed using a structured questionnaire, with responses quantified on a ten-point ordinal scale. Statistical analysis, including t-tests and descriptive statistics, was employed to analyse the data and determine any significant disparities in preferences between the two consumer groups. The results of the study reveal notable differences in consumer preferences between urban and rural markets across all three dimensions examined. Urban consumers tend to prioritize factors such as freshness, brand reputation, and attractive packaging, reflecting their convenience-oriented and health-conscious lifestyles. In contrast, rural consumers exhibit preferences for traditional methods, locally sourced products, and functional packaging, reflecting their cultural values and community-oriented approach to consumption. Several recommendations are proposed to better cater to the diverse needs of consumers in both urban and rural settings. Businesses operating in the perishable products sector are advised to customize their product offerings and marketing strategies to align with the preferences and values of each consumer segment. Additionally, attention should be given to packaging and presentation, ensuring that designs appeal to the aesthetic sensibilities of urban consumers while also reflecting the authenticity and heritage valued by rural consumers. Collaborative efforts between urban and rural producers, suppliers, and retailers are recommended to leverage the strengths of both supply chains and foster greater inclusivity in the market.

Keywords:

Consumer preferences, Perishable products, Urban markets, Rural markets, Maharashtra, Quality and Freshness, Health and Nutrition awareness, Packaging and Presentation

1. INTRODUCTION

Consumers' preferences for perishable products play a vital role in shaping the dynamics of both urban and rural markets in Maharashtra, India. Understanding these preferences is essential for businesses, policymakers, and researchers to tailor their strategies effectively. This

essay delves into a comparative study of consumer preferences for perishable products in Maharashtra's urban and rural markets, exploring the factors influencing these preferences and the implications for stakeholders.

Maharashtra's urban and rural areas exhibit 'significant difference' in demographic profiles, which influence consumer preferences for perishable products. Urban areas are characterized by higher population density, diverse income levels, and varied lifestyles. In contrast, rural areas often have a more homogenous population with lower income levels and traditional lifestyles. These demographic variations contribute to distinct consumption patterns and preferences.

Income levels play a crucial role in determining consumers' purchasing power and preferences for perishable products. Urban consumers typically have higher disposable incomes, enabling them to afford premium perishable items and imported goods. In contrast, rural consumers often have limited purchasing power and prioritize affordability over brand loyalty or product variety. Therefore, price sensitivity significantly influences consumer preferences in both markets.

The accessibility and availability of perishable products differ significantly between urban and rural areas. Urban consumers have easy access to supermarkets, hypermarkets, and specialty stores offering a wide range of perishable goods. In contrast, rural consumers rely heavily on local markets, small shops, and informal vendors for their perishable product needs. Limited access to transportation infrastructure and distribution networks further exacerbates the disparities in product availability between urban and rural areas.

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping consumers' preferences for perishable products. Urban consumers, influenced by globalization and changing lifestyles, often prioritize convenience, novelty, and international cuisines. In contrast, rural consumers tend to adhere to traditional dietary habits, preferring locally sourced and seasonal produce. Cultural preferences, such as specific cooking methods, regional cuisines, and festive traditions, also influence the demand for perishable products in both markets.

Increasing environmental awareness is influencing consumers' preferences for perishable products in both urban and rural areas. Urban consumers, concerned about sustainability and food waste, may seek eco-friendly packaging options and support brands with transparent supply chains. In contrast, rural consumers, often more closely connected to agricultural practices, may prioritize organic or pesticide-free produce, reflecting their environmental concerns and health-consciousness.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The literature on consumer behaviour in rural and urban markets, particularly concerning fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), offers valuable insights into the factors influencing purchasing decisions and brand loyalty among consumers. Abbas Ali et al. (2012) conducted an empirical study in South India, identifying various factors that influence the purchase of FMCG by rural consumers, shedding light on the unique characteristics of rural markets.

Similarly, Chandrasekhar (2012) explored consumer buying behaviour and brand loyalty in rural markets, emphasizing the importance of understanding consumer preferences in these segments.

Hemanth and Sheruthi (2013) proposed a theoretical framework for understanding the determinants of consumer buying behaviour in rural India, providing a foundation for further empirical research in this area. Meanwhile, Hitesh Kumar Pant and Pratibha Pant (2013) conducted a study on the buying behaviour of rural consumers, contributing to the understanding of consumer preferences and decision-making processes in rural markets. Mridanish Jha (2013) focused on Bihar, analysing rural consumer buying behaviour and highlighting regional variations in consumer preferences.

In contrast, Venkatesan and Natarajan (2013) examined the buying behaviour of urban women in Kancheepuram district, emphasizing the importance of gender-specific considerations in understanding consumer preferences. Additionally, Sudhanshu and Sarat (2010) proposed non-conventional marketing strategies for rural India, acknowledging the need for innovative approaches to reach rural consumers effectively.

The literature also includes contributions from scholars such as Singh and Pandey, Gopaldaswamy, Anderson and Narus (2004), and Dr. Vinod Kumar Bishnoi, covering various aspects of rural and agricultural marketing, rural marketing perspectives, and consumer behaviour in India. These works collectively highlight the significance of understanding the unique characteristics and preferences of rural consumers, as well as the importance of tailored marketing strategies to effectively tap into rural market potential.

Furthermore, recent studies by researchers such as Ankit Katiyar and Nikha Katiyar (2014), S. Kalaiselvi (2014), Prof. Lakshmi Narayana K and Dr. Binoy Mathew (2015) have contributed empirical insights into brand awareness, customer preferences, and product selection behaviour among rural consumers in different regions of India, further enriching the understanding of rural consumer behaviour in the context of FMCG products.

3. RESEARCH GAP

Understanding the nuanced preferences of consumers for perishable products in Maharashtra's urban and rural markets is crucial for businesses, policymakers, and researchers alike. However, despite the significance of this topic, there exists a notable research gap in comprehensively exploring and comparing these preferences across different dimensions such as quality and freshness, health and nutrition awareness, and packaging and presentation.

One significant research gap lies in the limited attention given to the comparison of consumer preferences for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra. While several studies have examined consumer behaviour in either urban or rural settings separately, few have conducted a comparative analysis between these two distinct markets within the same geographical region. Consequently, there is a lack of understanding regarding the specific factors driving consumer preferences in each context and the potential variations between urban and rural consumers.

Moreover, existing research often overlooks the multifaceted nature of consumer preferences for perishable products. While some studies may focus solely on quality and freshness, others may explore health and nutrition awareness or packaging and presentation independently. This fragmented approach fails to capture the holistic perspective needed to understand the complex interplay of factors shaping consumer choices in the context of perishable products. As a result, there is a need for research that integrates these different dimensions and examines their collective influence on consumer preferences.

Furthermore, the existing literature tends to lack depth in exploring the underlying reasons behind any observed differences in consumer preferences between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra. While studies may identify variations in preferences, they often do not delve into the socio-economic, cultural, and environmental factors driving these differences. Without a comprehensive understanding of these underlying drivers, it becomes challenging for stakeholders to develop targeted strategies to meet the diverse needs of consumers in both markets effectively.

Additionally, most of the previous research in this area has focused on quantitative methods, such as surveys and statistical analyses, to examine consumer preferences. While these methods provide valuable insights into general trends and patterns, they may overlook the rich qualitative aspects of consumer behaviour, such as attitudes, perceptions, and cultural influences. Thus, there is a need for research that incorporates qualitative approaches, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the complex motivations underlying consumer preferences for perishable products.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To determine if there is a 'significant difference' in consumer preference for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra based on quality and freshness.
2. To assess whether there is a 'significant variance' in consumer preference for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra regarding health and nutrition awareness.
3. To investigate the presence of a 'significant distinction' in consumer preference for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra concerning packaging and presentation.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants:

The study involves a sample of 30 urban and 30 rural customers of perishable products from various Mandis, Retail shops, and Supermarkets located in different rural and urban localities of Maharashtra. Participants are selected through random sampling to ensure representativeness.

Data Collection:

A structured questionnaire is used to survey participants, enquiring about their preferences for perishable products based on quality and freshness, health and nutrition awareness, and packaging and presentation. Responses are quantified on a ten-point ordinal scale, allowing for a detailed assessment of preferences.

Data Analysis:

Descriptive analysis is conducted to calculate the mean and standard deviation of preferences for each parameter among both rural and urban customers. The data is then visually represented using diagrams, to illustrate any observed trends or patterns.

Statistical Analysis:

A t-test is employed to compare the mean preferences of rural and urban consumers of Maharashtra across the selected parameters. This statistical test helps determine whether any 'significant difference' exist in preferences between the two groups.

Analytical Tools:

Microsoft Excel is utilized for data processing, analysis, and visualization. The software allows for efficient management of survey data, calculation of descriptive statistics, and creation of graphical representations. Excel's built-in functions and tools facilitate the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Limitations:

Several limitations may affect the study's findings, including:

Sample Size: The sample size of 30 urban and 30 rural customers may not fully represent the diverse population of Maharashtra.

Self-reporting Bias: Participants' responses may be influenced by social desirability bias or recall bias, affecting the accuracy of the data.

Geographic Limitations: The study focuses exclusively on customers from Maharashtra, limiting the generalizability of findings to other regions.

Time Constraints: The study's timeframe may restrict the depth of data collection and analysis, potentially overlooking certain nuances in consumer preferences.

External Factors: External variables, such as seasonal variations or economic fluctuations, may impact participants' preferences but are not explicitly addressed in the study.

6. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Quality and Freshness Hypotheses:

H0: There is no 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra in terms of quality and freshness.

H1: There is a 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra in terms of quality and freshness.

Health and Nutrition Awareness Hypotheses:

H0: There is no 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra concerning health and nutrition awareness.

H1: There is a 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra concerning health and nutrition awareness.

Packaging and Presentation Hypotheses:

H0: There is no 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra regarding packaging and presentation.

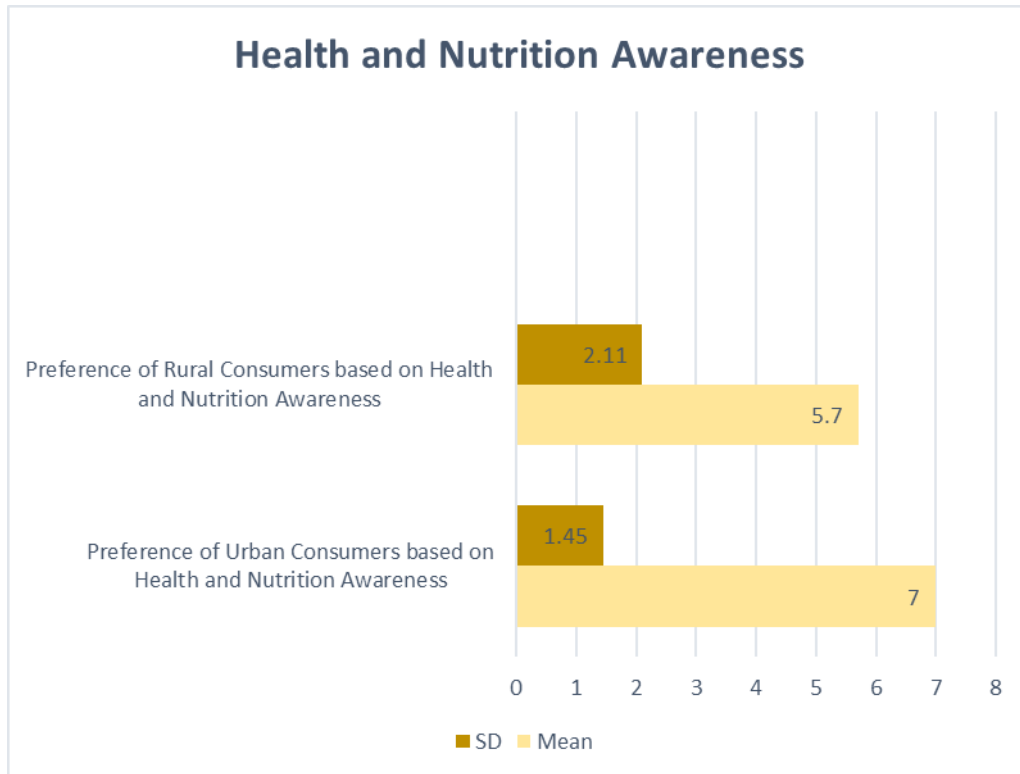
H1: There is a 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra regarding packaging and presentation.

7. DATA ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION

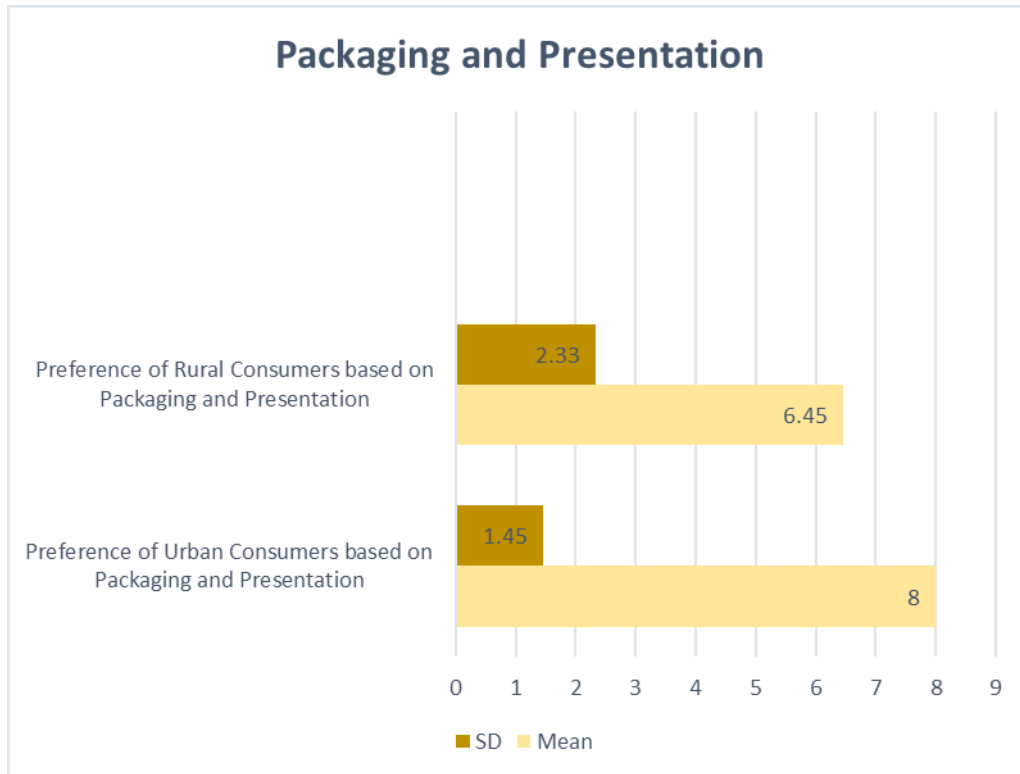
Comparative Preference of Consumers based on Quality and Freshness:



The results of the t-test indicate a statistically 'significant difference' in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra in terms of quality and freshness ($t = -3.05$, $p = 0.004$). With a two-tailed critical t-statistics value of -3.05 and a corresponding p-value of 0.004, which is significant at the 1% level of significance, we reject the null hypothesis (H0) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H1). This suggests that there is indeed a notable disparity in preferences between urban and rural consumers regarding quality and freshness of perishable products. Specifically, the mean preference score for urban customers ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 1.83$) is significantly lower than that of rural customers ($M = 8.3$, $SD = 1.34$). This result aligns with the understanding that urban consumers may prioritize factors such as freshness, brand reputation, and packaging, whereas rural consumers may place greater emphasis on locally sourced products and traditional preservation methods. Therefore, the findings underscore the importance of considering regional preferences and cultural influences when catering to consumer demand for perishable products in Maharashtra.

Comparative Preference of Consumers based on Health and Nutrition Awareness:

The results of the t-test indicate a statistically ‘significant difference’ in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra concerning health and nutrition awareness ($t = 2.27$, $p = 0.02$). With a two-tailed critical t-statistics value of 2.27 and a corresponding p-value of 0.02, which is significant at the 5% level of significance, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_1). This suggests that there is indeed a notable discrepancy in preferences between urban and rural consumers regarding health and nutrition awareness of perishable products. Specifically, the mean preference score for urban customers ($M = 7$, $SD = 1.45$) is significantly higher than that of rural customers ($M = 5.7$, $SD = 2.11$). The higher standard deviation for rural consumers indicates a greater variability in preferences, which aligns with the understanding that rural consumers may have diverse dietary habits and cultural preferences. This result underscores the importance of considering consumers' level of health consciousness and nutritional awareness when catering to their preferences for perishable products in Maharashtra, with urban consumers likely being more influenced by health trends and nutritional value compared to their rural counterparts.

Comparative Preference of Consumers based on Packaging and Presentation:

The results of the t-test reveal a statistically ‘significant difference’ in preference for perishable products between urban and rural consumers of Maharashtra concerning packaging and presentation ($t = 2.52$, $p = 0.01$). With a two-tailed critical t-statistics value of 2.52 and a corresponding p-value of 0.01, significant at the 5% level of significance, we reject the null hypothesis (H_0) and accept the alternative hypothesis (H_1). This indicates a significant disparity in preferences between urban and rural consumers regarding packaging and presentation of perishable products. Specifically, the mean preference score for urban customers ($M = 8$, $SD = 1.45$) is significantly higher than that of rural customers ($M = 6.45$, $SD = 2.33$). The higher standard deviation for rural consumers suggests a greater variability in preferences, possibly reflecting diverse preferences for packaging functionality and traditional presentation methods. This result underscores the importance of considering regional preferences and cultural influences when designing packaging and presentation strategies for perishable products in Maharashtra, with urban consumers likely valuing convenience and aesthetics, while rural consumers may prioritize functionality and tradition.

8. CONCLUSION

In light of the conducted analysis, the study aimed at comparing consumer preferences for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra has yielded significant findings. Across all three dimensions—quality and freshness, health and nutrition awareness, and packaging and presentation—distinct differences in preferences were observed between urban and rural consumers. Urban consumers exhibited preferences aligned with convenience,

health consciousness, and aesthetic appeal, while rural consumers leaned towards traditional methods, functionality, and local sourcing. These findings underscore the importance of tailoring marketing strategies and product offerings to suit the unique preferences and cultural contexts of both urban and rural consumers. By acknowledging these disparities, stakeholders can better address consumer needs and foster inclusive market growth in Maharashtra's perishable product sector.

9. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study comparing consumer preferences for perishable products between urban and rural markets in Maharashtra, several recommendations can be made to better cater to the diverse needs of consumers in both settings.

Firstly, businesses operating in the perishable products sector should recognize the importance of customization in product offerings. Urban consumers, who prioritize factors such as freshness, brand reputation, and packaging, may benefit from a wider range of premium products with appealing packaging designs. On the other hand, rural consumers, who value traditional methods and local sourcing, may prefer products that highlight authenticity and functionality. Therefore, businesses should consider diversifying their product lines to include options that cater to the preferences of both urban and rural consumers.

Secondly, marketing strategies should be tailored to resonate with the distinct preferences and values of consumers in urban and rural areas. Urban consumers, who are often more health-conscious and trend-sensitive, may respond well to marketing campaigns that emphasize the nutritional benefits and sustainability of perishable products. In contrast, marketing efforts targeting rural consumers should focus on highlighting the local sourcing, traditional production methods, and community-oriented values associated with the products. By aligning marketing messages with the values and preferences of each consumer segment, businesses can effectively engage with their target audience and build stronger brand loyalty.

Thirdly, packaging and presentation play a crucial role in influencing consumer perceptions and purchasing decisions. Urban consumers, who appreciate convenient packaging options and attractive presentations, may be more inclined to purchase products that offer ease of use and visually appealing packaging. In contrast, rural consumers may prefer products packaged in traditional materials that reflect their cultural heritage and values. Therefore, businesses should consider adapting their packaging designs to cater to the preferences of both urban and rural consumers, ensuring that they strike the right balance between functionality, aesthetics, and cultural authenticity.

Finally, fostering communication and collaboration between urban and rural producers, suppliers, and retailers can help bridge the gap between consumer preferences in different market settings. By facilitating partnerships and exchange programs, businesses can leverage the strengths of both urban and rural supply chains to meet the diverse demands of consumers more effectively. Additionally, initiatives aimed at educating consumers about the value of locally sourced and traditionally produced perishable products can help foster greater

appreciation and support for local producers, thereby contributing to the sustainable growth of both urban and rural markets.

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