
CONSUMER AWARENESS AMONG MIDDLE-CLASS HOMEMAKERS IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

The primary purpose of this paper is to enunciate the extent of cognizance possessed by homemakers in Chennai, with regard to their rights and responsibilities during grocery purchases. Eleven parameters that represent responsible consumer behaviour were identified. The study, using a questionnaire, was conducted amongst 80 middle-class homemakers to gauge the demographic influences on degree of consumer awareness. Most homemakers preferred shopping for groceries at a convenient store or a super market. Many middle-class homemakers feel the need to be constantly vigilant during grocery purchases, due to unsatisfactory experiences.

KEY WORDS: Consumer Protection, Consumer Awareness, Consumer Responsibility

INTRODUCTION

Consumers form an integral part of the economic system of a country. Their roles are not confined to merely being the final link in the supply chain in the sale of goods and services. A consumer is an informed participant, who exerts influence on the way a market functions. However, due to lack of awareness, Indian consumers fall prey to unfair and fraudulent tactics of marketers. Exploitation could be in the form of selling look-alikes, less weight, inferior quality goods and services, and exorbitant prices. So, there is need of creating consumer awareness in our country, as higher the awareness, lower the exploitation, and vice versa. The degree of consumer awareness determines the satisfaction levels and standard of living of the consumers.

Consumer Awareness may be defined as clearly understanding the need and priority of purchasing, conditions and warranties of purchase agreement, and rights and duties of consumers.

The Consumer Protection Act, 1986 was enacted by the Parliament of India to protect the interests of Indian consumers. Consumer protection councils have also been established at the national, state and district levels to increase awareness.

In light of the above, the Government has enacted nearly 50 laws, which can be interpreted in favour of the consumer. These have been provided explicitly as six consumer rights namely,

- The right to be protected from all kinds of hazardous goods and services
- The right to be fully informed about the performance and quality of all goods and services
- The right to free choice of goods and services
- The right to be heard in all decision-making processes relating to consumer interests
- The right to seek redressal, whenever consumer rights have been infringed

- The right to complete consumer education

Consumer Responsibilities

In conjunction with the above rights, there is also an expectation that consumers act rationally, and accept a reasonable level of responsibility when exercising choice and entering into transactions in the marketplace. The following suggestions are offered by the Act as to what is expected from responsible consumers -

- Responsibility to be properly informed;
- Compare price, quality standard and features with competing products;
- Assess safety issues, such as the age suitability of toys and potentially dangerous features
- Understand that advertising and marketing material may not necessarily give the full picture, and further inquiries will be necessary;
- Avoid making hasty or impulsive decisions based on extravagant claims or exaggerated representations;
- Similar products can vary in terms of quality. It is reasonable to expect that a lower price than other competing products can mean lower quality. Quality expectations should be adjusted accordingly.
- Seek clarifications on Price indications, if it is outside the normal pattern or refrain from making the purchase.
- Consumers have a responsibility not to partake in illegal behaviour and report any irregularities to the appropriate authorities.

BACKGROUND

The Indian market is witnessing a paradigm shift in consumption pattern due to population growth, economic development and the ever-growing brand-conscious middle class that tends to influence consumerism in India to a large extent (Sriram.M. and A.M. Suresh, 2014). As per Population Census of India 2011, the Literacy rate of India has gone up to 74.04% in 2011, up from 65.38% in 2001, while that of Tamil Nadu is 80.3%. Despite this, in many States consumers fall easy victims to market malpractices. An example is the limited level of consumer awareness in undergraduate students in Thane (Indira Nair, 2012). A number of researchers have probed into the level of awareness among consumers with a view to improve the situation at hand.

B. Krishnakumar and S. Sakthiventhan (2012) observed that the degree of awareness of consumer protection laws in aspects of food adulteration, misuse of weights and consumer redressal mechanism ranged from low to moderate, among rural consumers in Cuddalore district. They concluded that the young had greater consumer awareness, than the middle- and old-aged people, and also that males had a greater degree of consumer awareness than females.

C. Sundaram, and N. Balaramalingam (2012) concluded that the degree of consumer awareness among women in Vellore district was very low.

Serene Shekhar (2009) had done a study on Women Consumers of Palanpur City in Gujarat, and concluded that majority of the women consumers showed low level of awareness and low utilization of consumer rights.

Indu Karki and Neelam Mehrotra (2008) analysed the level of awareness regarding standardizing bodies (ISI, Agmark and FPO), and consumer rights and acts among 120 homemakers, and pointed out that awareness of ISI mark and right to choose was highest among homemakers. Relationship between education of the respondents and awareness of standard marks was significant.

Ms Kiran Chaudhry, Ms Tanu Chandhiok and Mrs Parveen Dewan (May 2011) had noted in their study that the plight of the Indian consumers is a result of the following factors: short supply of essential goods and services, lack of effective and workable competition, lack of familiarity with advanced products, low literacy levels and unsatisfactory information flows leading to little awareness of consumer protection and reprisal mechanisms.

Mr. Neelkanta and Anand (1992) found in their study that people prefer to absorb and endure wrong done to them rather than fight against injustice. This is because consumers do not know the ways and means of facing them confidently.

Major volume of shopping decisions in Indian homes, especially with regard to household needs like groceries is made by the home maker. Hence, it is imperative that the homemakers make their purchase decisions by effectively exercising their consumer responsibilities.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study was undertaken to understand the degree of Consumer Awareness among middle-class homemakers in Chennai with the following objectives

- To understand the grocery buying habits
- To assess whether Chennai Women exercise their responsibilities as a consumer during grocery purchases.
- To study the impact of demographic factors on exercise of consumer responsibilities and awareness of Consumer Protection Act
- To gather and analyze opinions on ways to effectively enforce Consumer Protection

METHODOLOGY

The present study is confined to Chennai city conducted with the help of a structured questionnaire. For the purpose of the study, questionnaires were distributed to 120 homemakers with varying backgrounds depending on education, employment and income levels. To gain further knowledge about the Act and all its aspects, books, journals, articles and consumer forum websites, were extensively used to study more about the rights and responsibilities of a consumer.

The usable responses received from 80 homemaker's shows an acceptable Reliability Coefficient Alpha of 0.6968. The data collected has been formatted in accordance with the highlighted objectives.

DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS ON SAMPLE

Most homemakers (51 respondents, 63.8%) are unemployed, in the age group 40-50 years (32 respondents, 40%) with maximum educational level of Graduation (31 respondents, 39%), from middle-class families with annual income of Rupees 2 to 5 lakhs (41 respondents, 51.3%), and a family size of 4 to 5 members (47 respondents, 59%). Respondents with family size of 6 or more members were from joint families.

Table1 A. Profile of Respondents

DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLE	RESPONDENT DETAILS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENT AGE RESPONDENTS
Age (in Years)	Below 40	26	32.5
	40-50	32	40.0
	Above 50	22	27.5
	Total	80	100.0
Maximum Educational Qualification	Upto Class 10	10	12.5
	Upto Class 12	19	23.8
	Graduation	31	38.8
	Post Graduate / Professional	20	25.0
	Total	80	100.0
Occupation	Unemployed	51	63.8
	Employed	29	36.3
	Total	80	100.0
Family Size	Upto 3	18	22.5
	4-5	47	58.8
	6 and above	15	18.8
	Total	80	100.0
Annual Family Income (Rupees in lakhs)	Below 2	14	17.5
	2-5	41	51.3
	Above 5	25	31.3
	Total	80	100.0

Table1 B. Grocery Buying Habit

	RESPONDENT DETAILS	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS (Out of 80)	PERCENT AGE RESPONDENTS
Preferred Distribution Outlet	Wholesale Shop	26	32.50
	Super Market	32	40.00
	Convenient Store	32	40.00
Frequency of Monthly Purchases	Adhoc (based on need)	33	41.25
	Weekly Purchases	21	26.25
	One Bulk Purchase	53	66.25

Most respondents shopped from a combination of different distribution outlets. Convenience and ease of shopping in Convenient Store and Super Markets are more important to most middle-class homemakers than price advantage offered by low-priced whole-sale shops.

ANALYSIS AND INFERENCES

DEGREE OF CONSUMER RESPONSIBILITY

Eleven statements of consumer behaviour during grocery purchases were listed in the questionnaire, and respondents were required to rate each on the Likert's 5-point scale [5 – Always; 4 – Almost Always, 3 – Sometimes, 2 – Rarely, 1 – Never].

This was used as the basis to gauge the degree of Consumer Responsibility. A higher rating indicates higher degree of Consumer Responsibility. Mean Score of the eleven statements by each respondent, indicating their overall degree of consumer responsibility, was used for further analysis and interpretations.

CLASSIFICATION OF CONSUMERS

Based on Quartiles, the respondents were classified as showing Low (<Q1), Moderate (Q1 to Q2) and High (>Q3) degrees of consumer responsibility. Most respondents show a moderate degree of consumer responsibility (40%). This implies that there is scope for having improvement in consumer behavior.

Table 1 C.Frequency Distribution of Level of Consumer Responsibility of Homemakers

Level of Consumer Responsibility	Frequency	Percent
Low	22	27.5
Moderate	32	40.0
High	26	32.5
Total	80	100.0

HYPOTHESIS 1.1

Null Hypothesis 1.1: There is no significant difference among mean ranks of parameters of Consumer Responsibility

Table 1.1 Friedman test for significant difference among mean ranks of parameters of Consumer Responsibility

	Parameters for Responsible Consumer Behaviour	Mean Rank	Chi – Square value	P value
R1	I am usually aware of different Brands of grocery products available in the market.	6.34	220.434	<0.001**
R2	I seek the shopkeeper / salesperson's recommendation in purchases	3.23		
R3	I get attracted by advertisements in Media (radio / TV / Notices / Billboards)	3.01		
R4	I check the MRP (Maximum Retail Price)	7.74		
R5	I compare prices of different Brands before making a purchase decision	5.76		
R6	I prefer using Branded Products.	6.28		
R7	I look for Standardization Marks (like – FPO, AGMARK)	6.15		
R8	I check for Manufacturing and Expiry Dates on the labels	7.76		
R9	I examine the net weight, nutritional facts, precautions and usage instructions before buying.	5.63		
R10	I always insist on a Cash Memo	7.11		
R11	If goods are faulty / defective / not of satisfactory quality I return to the shopkeeper and ask for replacement	6.99		

Note : ** denotes significant at 1% level

Since P value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is rejected at the 1 percent level of significance. Hence, it is concluded that there is a significant difference among mean ranks of parameters of Consumer Responsibility. Based on mean rank, during Grocery purchases, Checking Manufacturing and Expiry Dates (7.76) is most important, followed by checking MRP (7.74) and Insisting on Cash Memo (7.11). The least important parameters are making purchase decision based on influence of advertisements in Media (3.01) and seeking shopkeeper's recommendations (3.23). The parameter ranked fourth by homemakers is 'If goods are faulty / defective / not of satisfactory quality, I return to the shopkeeper and ask for replacement' (6.99). All other parameters are also given average weightage by the respondents.

This clearly indicates that the average Urban middle-class Common Woman shows moderate degree of Consumer Responsibility, is prudent and not influenced by external forces, while making purchasing decisions.

HYPOTHESIS 1.2

Null Hypothesis 1.2: There is no significant difference with respect to demographic variables (employment, age, educational qualification, family size, annual income) in the exercise of consumer responsibility among homemakers during grocery purchases

Table 1.2 T test/ ANOVA for significance of demographic variables in the exercise of consumer responsibility by homemakers during grocery purchases

Demographic Variables	Category	Mean	SD	t value / F value	P value
Occupation	Unemployed	41.80	5.56	1.596	0.115
	Employed	39.62	6.41		
Age Group in Years	Below 40	41.62	4.74	1.388	0.256
	40 - 50	41.75	5.29		
	Above 50	39.23	7.75		
Educational Qualification	Upto SSLC	39.90	6.37	.537	0.658
	HSc	42.16	7.21		
	UG	40.32	5.44		
	PG	41.55	5.33		
Family Size	Upto 3	40.67	5.80	.676	0.512
	4-5	41.60	6.09		
	6 and above	39.60	5.76		
Annual Income (Rs. In Lakhs)	Below 2	40.14	8.71	1.315	0.274
	2-5	40.34	5.11		
	Above 5	42.60	5.27		

There is no significant difference with respect to demographic factors in the exercise of consumer responsibility by homemakers, since P value is greater than 0.05. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted. Hence concluded that irrespective of demographic backgrounds, the average urban homemakers show moderate degree of consumer responsibility.

HYPOTHESIS 2

Null Hypothesis 2: There is no significant difference based on demographic variables (employment, age, educational qualification, family size, annual income) with respect to awareness of CPA (Consumer Protection Act)

Table 2: Chi-Square Test for significant difference based on demographic variables with respect to awareness of CPA

Demographic Variable	Category	Awareness of CPA		Total	Chi square Value	P value
		Yes	No			
Employment	Unemployed	23 (45.1%) [48.9%]	28 (54.9%) [84.8%]	51 (100.0%) [63.8%]	10.820	0.001**
	Employed	24 (82.8%) [51.1%]	5 (17.2%) [15.2%]	29 (100.0%) [36.3%]		
	Total	47 (58.8%) [100.0%]	33 (41.3%) [100.0%]	80 (100.0%) [100.0%]		
Age Group in Years	Below 40	14 (53.8%) [29.8%]	12 (46.2%) [36.4%]	26 (100.0%) [32.5%]	0.445	0.801
	40 – 50	20 (62.5%) [42.6%]	12 (37.5%) [36.4%]	32 (100.0%) [40.0%]		
	Above 50	13 (59.1%) [27.7%]	9 (40.9%) [27.3%]	22 (100.0%) [27.5%]		
Educational Qualification	Upto SSLC	5 (50.0%) [10.6%]	5 (50.0%) [15.2%]	10 (100.0%) [12.5%]	14.675	0.002**
	HSc	5 (26.3%) [10.6%]	14 (73.7%) [42.4%]	19 (100.0%) [23.8%]		
	UG	20 (64.5%) [42.6%]	11 (35.5%) [33.3%]	31 (100.0%) [38.8%]		
	PG	17 (85.0%) [36.2%]	3 (15.0%) [9.1%]	20 (100.0%) [25.0%]		

Family Size	Upto 3	10 (55.6%) [21.3%]	8 (44.4%) [24.2%]	18 (100.0%) [22.5%]	8.995	0.011*
	4-5	33 (70.2%) [70.2%]	14 (29.8%) [42.4%]	47 (100.0%) [58.8%]		
	6 and above	4 (26.7%) [8.5%]	11 (73.3%) [33.3%]	15 (100.0%) [18.8%]		
Annual Income (Rs. In Lakhs)	Below 2	7 (50.0%) [14.9%]	7 (50.0%) [21.2%]	14 (100.0%) [17.5%]	0.542	0.763
	2-5	25 (61.0%) [53.2%]	16 (39.0%) [48.5%]	41 (100.0%) [51.3%]		
	Above 5	15 (60.0%) [31.9%]	10 (40.0%) [30.3%]	25 (100.0%) [31.3%]		
Total		47 (58.8%) [100.0%]	33 (41.3%) [100.0%]	80 (100.0%) [100.0%]		

- Note:** 1. The value within () refers to Row Percentage
 2. the value within [] refers to Column Percentage
 3. ** Denotes significant at 1% level
 4. * Denotes significant at 5% level

The null hypothesis is rejected since P value is less than 0.01 for Employment and Educational Qualification at 1% level of significance and also P value is less than 0.050 for family size at 5% significance level. It is observed that CPA awareness is high among Employed (82.8%) and educated (PG-85%; UG-64.5%) homemakers. Also, CPA awareness is highest in families with 4-5 members (70.2%). It is lowest in families with 6 or more members, which are joint families (8.5%) with more than one bread winner. Hence it is concluded that CPA is higher in families with more dependent members. However, there is no significant association between age and annual family income on awareness of CPA, since P value is greater than 0.05.

On an overall basis, majority homemakers (58.8%) are aware of CPA Law. But 41.3% of the urban homemakers are not aware of CPA laws which may be a reason why few retailers resort to careless / unfair trade practices.

The survey further revealed that kinds of unsatisfactory experience in grocery purchases included: inferior quality (47.5%), false guarantees (20%), goods sold for more than its MRP (17.5%) and less quantity (15%). This throws light on the fact that even in urban areas, where people are better informed than in towns and rural areas, there are unhealthy trade practices followed by certain retailers. This emphasizes the need for shopper to be vigilant during grocery purchase.

HYPOTHESIS 3

Null Hypothesis 3: There is no association between awareness of CPA and exercise of Consumer Responsibility among Homemakers

Table 3 Chi-square test for association between awareness of CPA and Consumer Responsibility

Exercise of Consumer Responsibility	Aware of Consumer Protection Laws		Total	Chi-square Value	P value
	Yes	No			
Low	12 (54.5%) [25.5%]	10 (45.5%) [30.3%]	22 100.0% 27.5%	0.249	0.883
Moderate	19 (59.4%) [40.4%]	13 (40.6%) [39.4%]	32 (100.0%) [40.0%]		
High	16 (61.5%) [34.0%]	10 (38.5%) [30.3%]	26 (100.0%) [32.5%]		
Total	47 (58.8%) [100.0%]	33 (41.3%) [100.0%]	80 (100.0%) [100.0%]		

Note: 1. The value within () refers to Row Percentage
2. the value within [] refers to Column Percentage

Since P value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted at 5 percent level of significance. Hence, it is concluded that there is no association between awareness of CPA and exercise of Consumer Responsibilities among Chennai Homemakers.

HYPOTHESIS 4

Respondents were asked to rank four sources for increasing awareness and ensuring Consumer Protection.

Null Hypothesis: There is no significant difference among mean ranks of sources for ensuring Consumer Protection

Table 4 : Friedman test for significant difference among mean ranks of sources for ensuring Consumer Protection

Effective Source to ensure Consumer Protection	Mean Rank	Chi-Square value	P value
Awareness through Media (TV, Radio, News)	1.77	37.463	<0.001**
More stringent punishment to sellers and traders who indulge in malpractice	2.76		
There should be faster consumer disputes redressal	2.86		
Syllabi of schools and colleges	2.61		

Note: ** Denotes significant at 1% level

Since P value is less than 0.01, the null hypothesis is rejected at 1 percent level of significance. Hence concluded that there is significant difference among mean ranks towards the different sources. Based on mean rank, 'awareness through Media' (1.68) is most Effective, followed by 'Syllabi of Schools and Colleges' (2.61), 'more stringent punishment to sellers and traders who indulge in malpractice' (2.69) and 'there should be faster consumer disputes redressal' (2.76). Hence concluded that in order for society to have higher degree of Consumer Protection, homemakers perceive that the sources that will help educate citizens to have greater Consumer Awareness is more effective than punishments for fraudulent or negligent practices by retailers.

FINDINGS AND SUGGESTIONS

Groceries, for everyday need, are mostly obtained from convenient stores, and the study conducted reveals that there is scope for improvement for consumers to be more prudent in exercising their responsibilities during purchases. The findings can be summarized as follows:

- Most homemakers make one bulk purchase every month.
- Homemakers shop from a combination of different distribution outlets. The most preferred retail outlets were Convenient Stores and Super Markets, compared to a low-priced Whole Sale shops
- Irrespective of their demographic influences, the average Urban middle-class Common Woman shows moderate degree of Consumer Responsibility, is prudent and not influenced by external forces, while making purchasing decisions.
- During Grocery purchases, homemakers give most importance to Checking Manufacturing and Expiry Dates, MRP and Insisting on Cash Memo, and the least importance to making purchase decision based on influence of Media advertisements and seeking shopkeeper's recommendations.
- Homemakers need to assert their right to a redressal, in case of a less than satisfactory purchase experience.
- Types of unsatisfactory experiences in grocery purchases include: inferior quality, false guarantees, pricing goods at more than their MRP and less quantity sold.

- There is no significant association between demographic factors and exercise of consumer responsibility by homemakers
- Majority of homemakers are aware of CPA Laws.
- Demography influences CPA awareness. It is high among employed and educated homemakers, and families with more dependent members.
- Most effective ways to enforce Consumer Responsibility is spreading awareness via media and to continue including CPA in educational curriculum.

Grocery shopping is an essential exercise of every family and the demand for this purchase, usually arises from the lady of the house. In a fast paced world, families seek to meet this need at a retail outlet close to home.

Considerable numbers of urban homemakers are not aware of CPA laws which may be a reason why few retailers resort to careless / unfair trade practices. Most shoppers in the metropolitan city of Chennai have had experiences of unsatisfactory purchases, and the average urban middle class woman needs to be ever-vigilant, and seek replacements from shopkeepers, when sold faulty products. Ethical practices by retail outlets is a need even in urban societies with a high degrees of consumer awareness. This throws light on the fact that even in urban areas, where people are better informed than in towns and rural areas, there are unhealthy trade practices followed by certain retailers. This emphasizes the need for homemakers to be vigilant, when shopping for groceries.

Hence concluded that homemakers feel that the society as a whole should first have Consumer Awareness. Persistent steps to educate citizens on their rights and responsibilities through media and school education is essential for this purpose. A society with high degree of consumer awareness will urge retailers to be cautious, stop unfair trade practices and be ethical. Only with increased Consumer Awareness, there will be greater Consumer Protection.

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