

International Journal of Agriculture Extension and Social Development

Volume 8; Issue 1; January 2025; Page No. 309-313

Received: 11-11-2024
Accepted: 15-12-2024

Indexed Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal

Consumer preferences and patterns among college students

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26180723.2025.v8.i1e.1584>

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Abstract

Consumer buying behavior is a complex process influenced by multiple factors such as personal preferences, social influences, and financial constraints. College students represent a unique segment of consumers due to their evolving needs, digital engagement, and limited budgets. This study investigated the consumer buying behavior of college students at the College of Community Science, UAS Dharwad, focusing on their purchasing patterns, influencing factors, and preferred modes of shopping. A sample of 60 undergraduate and postgraduate students was selected using a random sampling technique, and data were collected through a structured questionnaire. The results of the research study revealed that college students exhibited distinctive buying behaviors shaped by affordability, convenience, and exposure to digital platforms. Offline purchases remained preferred for essential items, whereas online shopping catered to convenience and variety. Social media played a pivotal role in decision-making, underscoring the influence of peer reviews and endorsements. Understanding these patterns is crucial for marketers to design effective strategies that resonate with the needs and behaviors of college students.

Keywords: Consumer buying behavior, college students, digital engagement, price sensitivity, offline shopping, online shopping, demographic influences

Introduction

Consumer buying behavior is a complex and multifaceted process that encompasses the actions and decisions consumers make when selecting, purchasing, and using products or services. Understanding consumer behavior is crucial for businesses aiming to meet the needs and preferences of their target market, as it directly influences how products are developed, marketed, and sold. Consumer buying behavior involves various stages, including need recognition, information search and evaluation of alternatives, the purchase decision, and post-purchase evaluation (Kotler & Keller, 2016) ^[1]. These stages are shaped by a combination of psychological, social, cultural, and personal factors, making the study of consumer behavior an essential part of marketing strategy.

University students are an important part of the consumer group in society because they have higher education, broader knowledge, more complex knowledge structures and deeper theoretical levels. They represent the most active, most responsive and least conservative group of intellectuals and are the driving force of future social development.

As a unique and influential segment, college students

exhibit specific buying patterns that are shaped by a combination of social, economic, and psychological factors. Their consumption habits are influenced not only by limited financial resources but also by evolving lifestyle needs, social pressures, and rapid technological advancements. This age group is often navigating newfound independence, balancing academic responsibilities with social activities, and making purchasing decisions that reflect their identity and values (Bakshi, 2021) ^[2].

One of the defining characteristics of college students' buying behavior is their preference for convenience, affordability, and digital engagement. According to research, students are highly responsive to promotions, discounts, and loyalty programs, making price sensitivity a key driver of their purchasing decisions (Schwarz & Timm, 2020) ^[3]. Furthermore, the rise of e-commerce and mobile shopping has significantly impacted their buying patterns, with a large majority relying on online platforms for both information and purchases. Social media also plays a pivotal role, with students heavily influenced by peer recommendations, online reviews, and the endorsements of influencers and celebrities (Nguyen *et al.*, 2022) ^[4].

In summary, understanding the consumer buying behavior

of college students is essential for businesses aiming to capture the loyalty of this highly connected and socially conscious demographic. By tapping into the factors that influence their purchasing decisions, including affordability, convenience, social media engagement, and value alignment, brands can create more effective marketing strategies that resonate with college students both in the short and long term.

Objectives

1. To analyze the consumer buying behavior of college students with a focus on purchasing patterns, key influencing factors and preferred modes of shopping.
2. To examine the relationship between socio-demographic variables and factors influencing purchasing decisions among college students.

Materials and Methods

This study was conducted at the College of Community Science, UAS Dharwad, during the academic year 2023-

2024. The population included undergraduate and postgraduate students enrolled at the main campus, comprising four colleges i.e., College of Agriculture, College of Agri-business management, College of Food technology and College of Community Science. The random sampling technique was employed to select 60 participants, with 40 students from the B.Sc. (Hons) program and 20 from the postgraduate program. A self-structured questionnaire consisting buying behavior pattern of different products and factors influencing the buying behavior was used to collect the data from the students. The questionnaire was digitized using Google Forms and distributed online to facilitate data collection. The collected data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequency and percentage distributions, and Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to assess relationships between socio-demographic variables and influencing factors.

Results and Discussion

Table 1: Socio-demographic details of the students, N=60

Demographic details	Frequency	Percent
Age		
18-26	53	88.30
27-35	06	10.00
36-60	01	1.70
Total	60	100.0
Gender		
Female	30	50.00
Male	30	50.00
Total	60	100.0
Education		
Graduation	40	60.00
Post graduation	20	40.00
Total	60	100.0
Family type		
Nuclear	54	90.00
Joint	06	10.00
Total	60	100.0
Income		
Below 1 lakh	32	53.30
1 lakh to 3 lakhs	11	18.30
3 lakhs to 5 lakhs	07	11.70
Above 5lakhs	10	16.70
Total	60	100.0

Table 1 indicates the socio-demographic profile of the students such as age, gender, education, family type and family income. Majority of the students were belonged to 18-26 years age group (83.33%) followed by 27-35 years (10%) highlighting the dominance of younger students in this study. Only one person belonged to above 36 years. Both male and female students equally considered for the present study. About 60 Percent under graduate (B.Sc.) and 40 Percent post graduate (M.Sc. and Ph.D.) were participated in the study. Majority of the students were from

nuclear family (90%) and only 10 Percent of them were from joint family reflecting a broader societal trend of smaller family units. With respect to annual family income level more than half of the respondent’s family income was below 1 lakh followed by 1 lakh to 3 lakhs (18.30%), above 5lakhs (16.70%) and 3 lakhs to 5 lakhs (11.70%) emphasizing their financial limitations. These findings suggest that affordability and financial constraints are likely to play a significant role in influencing the buying behavior of college students.

Table 2: Buying behavior of students for food products, N=60

Food Products	Weekly		Fortnightly		Monthly		Annually		Never		Online		Offline		Both	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Fruits	40	60.00	9	15.00	09	15.00	00	0.00	02	3.33	07	0.0	34	56.66	17	28.33
Processed food	20	33.33	19	31.66	21	35.00	00	0.00	00	0.00	06	10.00	31	51.66	23	38.33
Fast food	14	23.33	11	18.33	26	43.33	03	5.00	06	10.00	02	3.33	38	63.33	20	33.33
Bakery products	20	33.33	13	21.66	22	36.66	03	5.00	02	3.33	09	15.00	33	55.00	18	30.00
Beverages and desserts	14	23.33	10	16.66	30	50.00	02	3.33	05	8.33	08	13.33	42	70.00	10	16.66

Table 2 indicates the buying behavior of students towards different food products. Among all fruits, processed food, fast food, bakery products, bakery products, beverages and desserts considered for the present study. With regard to fruits more than half of the respondents (60%) were reported weekly purchasing followed by fortnightly and monthly (15%). Whereas monthly purchasing behavior was observed in all remaining food products such as processed food (35%), fast food (43.33%), bakery products (36.66%), beverages and desserts (50%), respondents were reported monthly purchasing followed by weekly and fortnightly. None of the respondents reported annually purchasing

behavior but very few of them expressed fast food (5%), bakery products (5%), beverages and desserts (3.33%) emphasizing the frequent nature of food purchases. Offline purchasing remains the dominant mode for all food products, suggesting that students prefer physical stores where they can examine product quality. However, a smaller percentage of students reported purchasing food items both online and offline, reflecting a growing acceptance of digital platforms for convenience. These results highlight that while students are open to online shopping, food purchases are still largely rooted in traditional buying habits.

Table 3: Buying behavior of students for clothing, N=60

Clothing	Weekly		Fortnightly		Monthly		Annually		Never		online		Offline		Both	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Casual wear	03	5.00	08	13.33	17	28.33	32	53.33	00	0.00	07	11.66	16	26.66	35	58.33
Formal wear	02	3.33	03	5.00	17	28.33	38	63.33	00	0.00	06	10.00	22	36.66	32	53.33
Sports wear	03	5.00	02	3.33	08	13.33	34	56.66	13	21.66	02	3.33	16	26.33	29	48.33
Occasional/party wear	02	3.33	02	3.33	08	13.33	44	73.33	04	6.66	09	15.00	18	30.00	33	55.00
Accessories	05	8.33	03	5.00	14	23.33	31	51.66	07	11.66	08	13.33	13	21.66	39	65.00

Table 3 indicates the buying behavior of students towards different products related to clothing. In contrast to the students purchasing behavior for food products, more than half of the respondents reported annually purchasing in clothing such as casual wear (53.33%), formal wear (63.33%), sportswear (56.66%), occasional/party wear (73.66%) and accessories (51.66%) followed by monthly and fortnightly. Very less Percent students reported weekly purchasing behavior in clothing. This behavior suggests that students tend to buy clothes on a need basis or during

specific occasions rather than frequently. About 21.66 Percent students expressed that they never buy sportswear followed by accessories (6.66%) and occasional/party wear (11.66%). In terms of shopping mode, most students preferred both online and offline channels, indicating that they balance convenience and physical product examination. These insights demonstrate that clothing purchases are influenced by factors like budget, specific needs, and seasonal requirements.

Table 4: Buying behavior of students for educational materials, N=60

Materials	Weekly		Fortnightly		Monthly		Annually		Never		online		Offline		Both	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Notebooks	10	16.66	06	10.00	23	38.33	21	35.00	00	0.00	00	0.00	35	58.33	16	26.66
Pens and pencils	09	15.00	15	25.00	26	43.33	10	16.66	00	0.00	07	11.66	34	56.66	17	28.33
Highlighters and markers	02	3.33	08	13.33	15	25.00	30	50.00	05	8.33	06	10.00	31	51.66	23	38.33
Sticky notes	01	1.66	03	5.00	12	20.00	27	45.00	17	28.33	02	3.33	28	46.66	17	28.33
Binders and folders	02	3.33	06	10.00	05	8.33	33	55.00	14	23.33	09	11.00	23	38.33	18	30.00
Art supplies	03	5.00	06	10.00	05	8.33	28	46.66	20	33.33	08	13.33	22	36.66	10	16.66
Textbooks	01	1.66	11	18.33	16	26.66	30	50.00	02	3.33	07	11.66	32	56.66	17	28.33

Table 4 shows that for educational materials, students demonstrated monthly purchasing habits for essential items like notebooks (38.33%) and pens/pencils (43.33%), aligning with their academic needs. However, items such as highlighters, markers, sticky notes, binders, and textbooks were predominantly purchased annually (45-55%), reflecting their longer usability and occasional requirement. Notably, around one-third of students reported never buying

items like sticky notes (28.33%) and art supplies (33.33%), likely due to their limited necessity. Offline purchasing dominated for educational materials, with some students opting for both online and offline modes. These findings emphasize that essential materials are bought regularly, whereas supplementary materials are purchased less frequently.

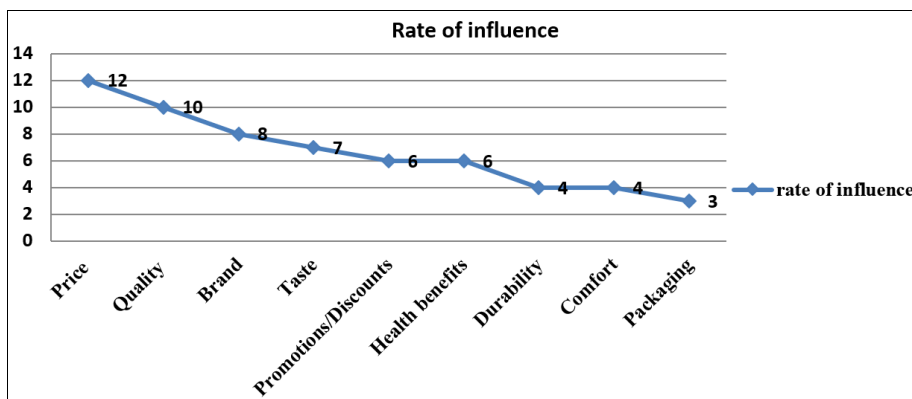


Fig 1: Factors influences buying behavior of students

The above figure 1 represents the factors influencing students buying behavior related various products. The major factors such as quality, comfort, price, durability, taste, band, health benefits were considered. The results revealed that price was the major influencing factor followed by quality, brand, taste, discounts/promotion, health benefits, durability, comfort and packing was the least influencing factor. With similar to these findings a study by Jadhav and Khanna (2016) [5] on qualitative analysis of factors influencing buying behavior of college students revealed that, the main influencing factors for shopping were identified as availability, low price, promotions, comparison, convenience, customer service, perceived ease of use, attitude, time consciousness, trust and variety seeking. Another study by Bucko *et al.* (2018) conducted a study to determine factors that affect the consumers’ willingness to purchase product and showed that 7 components such as price, availability, social proof, scarcity, product details, conditions and social media activity are the most common factors affecting and out of which price of the product became the most important factor among the respondents.

Table 5: Correlation between demographic variables and factors influences on buying behavior

Demographic variables	r-value
Age	0.431**
Education	0.411**
Gender	0.320*
Family type	0.12
Family income	0.27*

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Relationship between socio-demographic variable and influencing factors of buying behavior indicated in table 5. The results found that influencing factors were positively and highly significantly correlated with age and education. As the age and education increase students get information and experience which helps them to analyze various products and to take proper decision while buying. Gaurav and Sahu (2017) [6] reported that age is a fundamental factor, with younger consumers typically showing a stronger preference for online shopping, lifestyle products, and fashion-related items, while older consumers often prioritize essentials or healthcare products. As consumers age, they may place more value on quality and longevity rather than

trends. Education also influences buying decisions by enhancing consumer awareness and selectiveness. Educated consumers tend to conduct more research before purchasing and are typically more receptive to informational marketing content (Alooma and Lawan 2013) [7].

Gender and family income were also significantly correlated with influencing factors. Male and female express their choice and priorities towards buying behavior which makes difference between two genders. In addition to this income also important aspect based on this there is variation in student’s buying capacity and priorities. Richa (2012) [8] revealed that gender influences buying choices, particularly in categories such as fashion and lifestyle. Females are more impulsive buyers than males and are more likely to be attracted towards the promotional schemes offered by the online retailers and therefore buy more frequently through on-line shopping than do males. Whereas, higher income individuals are more likely to prioritize luxury, design and brand prestige in their purchases, whereas middle-income buyers often focus on utility and cost-effectiveness. All the socio-demographic variables found with positive correlation however, family type was non-significant.

Conclusion

The study highlighted that college students exhibited unique buying behaviors driven by financial constraints, practicality, and digital engagement. Price, quality, and brand reputation were the key factors influencing their decisions, with affordability being particularly critical due to limited budgets. Offline shopping remained prevalent for essentials like food and educational materials, offering immediate access and product evaluation. However, online shopping is gaining popularity for non-essential items, reflecting the growing influence of digital convenience. Social media and peer recommendations played a significant role, especially in lifestyle and fashion purchases, as students rely heavily on digital reviews and influencer endorsements. Demographic factors such as age, education, and family income further shape their preferences, with older and more educated students showing greater discernment in their choices. Marketers targeting this demographic must focus on value-driven strategies, offering affordable pricing, promotions, and leveraging social media campaigns to address their preferences effectively. Understanding these buying patterns can help businesses better cater to the needs of college students, ensuring long-term brand loyalty and satisfaction.

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