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IMPACT OF WORD-OF-MOUTH COMMUNICATION ON TRIBAL CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOUR: A STUDY OF SHIRPUR TALUKA, DHULE DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Word-of-mouth communication plays a crucial role in influencing consumer behaviour, particularly in tribal areas where interpersonal relationships and community ties are strong. The present study examines the impact of word-of-mouth communication on the buying behaviour of tribal consumers in Shirpur Taluka of Dhule District, Maharashtra. The research is based on primary data collected from 90 tribal consumers using a structured questionnaire comprising multiple-choice and Likert scale questions. The study analyses the sources of product information, level of trust in interpersonal communication, and the influence of positive and negative feedback on purchase decisions. Secondary data were collected from books, journals, government reports, and previous research studies to support the theoretical framework. Simple statistical tools such as percentages, tables, and charts were used for data analysis. The findings reveal that family members, neighbours, and shopkeepers are the most trusted sources of information, and word-of-mouth communication significantly affects the purchase decisions of tribal consumers. The study concludes that Word-Of-Mouth communication is more influential than formal advertising in tribal markets. The research provides valuable insights for marketers, policymakers, and researchers for designing effective communication strategies suitable for tribal areas.

KEYWORDS: Word-of-Mouth Communication; Tribal Consumers; Buying Behaviour; Shirpur Taluka; Consumer Behaviour.

INTRODUCTION

Consumer behaviour refers to the study of how individuals or groups select, purchase, use, and dispose of goods and services to satisfy their needs and wants. In tribal areas, consumer behaviour is deeply influenced by social structure, cultural values, traditions, and interpersonal relationships. Unlike urban consumers, tribal consumers rely more on informal communication channels such as family discussions, community meetings, neighbours, and local shopkeepers while making purchase decisions.

Word-of-mouth communication is an informal exchange of information and opinions among consumers regarding products and services. It is considered one of the most credible sources of information because it comes from trusted individuals without any commercial motive. In tribal communities, where literacy levels may be low and access to mass media is limited, word-of-mouth communication becomes a dominant factor influencing buying behaviour.

Shirpur Taluka of Dhule District has a significant tribal population, mainly dependent on agriculture, daily wage labour, and small-scale occupations. Weekly markets (haats), village shops, and interpersonal networks play an important role in shaping consumption patterns in this region. Tribal consumers generally prefer products that are recommended by family elders or community members and avoid products that receive negative feedback.

Understanding the impact of word-of-mouth communication on tribal consumer buying behaviour is essential for marketers and policymakers. Effective communication strategies tailored to tribal areas can improve product acceptance, awareness of government schemes, and access to essential goods. Despite its importance, limited empirical research has been conducted focusing specifically on word-of-mouth influence in tribal markets.

The present study attempts to bridge this research gap by analysing the role of word-of-mouth communication in influencing the buying behaviour of tribal consumers in Shirpur Taluka. The study provides empirical evidence based on primary data and offers practical implications for businesses and government agencies working in tribal areas.

Review of Literature

Previous studies have highlighted the importance of word-of-mouth communication in consumer decision-making, especially in rural and tribal markets. Kotler and Keller (2016) stated that word-of-mouth communication is one of the most powerful marketing tools, as

consumers trust personal recommendations more than advertisements. They emphasized that informal communication strongly influences first-time purchases.

Rani (2014) conducted a study on rural consumer behaviour in India and found that rural and tribal consumers rely heavily on interpersonal sources such as family members, friends, and local retailers for product information. The study concluded that word-of-mouth communication significantly affects brand selection and purchase decisions.

Patil and Deshmukh (2018) examined buying behaviour in tribal areas of Maharashtra and observed that cultural values and community influence play a major role in shaping consumption patterns. Their findings revealed that tribal consumers prefer products that are socially approved within the community.

A study by **Singh and Pandey (2020)** on word-of-mouth communication in rural markets found that negative word-of-mouth spreads faster than positive word-of-mouth and has a stronger impact on consumer decisions. The study emphasized the need for maintaining product quality to avoid negative feedback.

Choudhary (2021) analysed the impact of informal communication on consumer behaviour in backward regions and concluded that word-of-mouth communication reduces perceived risk and increases confidence among consumers. The study suggested that marketers should focus on opinion leaders in the community.

Although several studies have examined rural and tribal consumer behaviour, limited research is available specifically on the impact of word-of-mouth communication in Shirpur Taluka. The present study attempts to fill this gap by providing an empirical analysis based on primary data collected from tribal consumers.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the sources of word-of-mouth communication among tribal consumers in Shirpur Taluka.
2. To analyse the impact of word-of-mouth communication on buying behaviour of tribal consumers.
3. To examine the level of trust in word-of-mouth communication compared to advertisements.

Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive and analytical in nature. It is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data were collected from tribal consumers residing in Shirpur Taluka of Dhule District. A structured questionnaire was designed using multiple-choice and Likert scale questions to measure the impact of word-of-mouth communication on buying behaviour. Secondary data were collected from textbooks, research journals, government publications, reports, and relevant websites to understand theoretical concepts and previous research findings.

Sampling Design

The population of the study includes tribal consumers of Shirpur Taluka. A convenience random sampling method was adopted due to accessibility and time constraints. A total of 90 respondents were selected from different villages of Shirpur Taluka.

Sample Size

The sample size for the study is 90 tribal consumers.

Area of Study

The study area is Shirpur Taluka of Dhule District, Maharashtra. Shirpur Taluka has a substantial tribal population, primarily engaged in agriculture, labour work, and small-scale economic activities. Weekly markets and local shops are the main purchasing points for consumers in this region.

Tools for Analysis

Simple statistical tools such as percentages, tables, and charts were used for data analysis. Likert scale responses were analysed using mean score analysis.

Data Analysis and Statistical Interpretation

Table 1: Gender-wise Distribution of Respondents.

Gender	Respondents	Percentage
Male	52	57.78
Female	38	42.22

Interpretation: The sample shows male dominance (57.78%), reflecting higher market participation of male tribal members. However, female participation (42.22%) is substantial, indicating shared household decision-making.

Table 2: Age-wise Distribution of Respondents.

Age Group	Respondents	Percentage
Below 20	10	11.11
21–30	24	26.67
31–45	38	42.23
46 & Above	18	20.0

Interpretation: The majority (42.23%) fall in the 31–45 age group, representing economically active consumers. This group plays a critical role in purchase decisions within tribal households.

Table 3: Source of Product Information.

Source	Respondents	Percentage
Family Members	28	31.11
Friends	18	20.0
Neighbours	16	17.78
Shopkeepers	20	22.22
Advertisements	8	8.89

Interpretation: Interpersonal sources account for over 90% of information flow. Advertisements play a minimal role, confirming the dominance of word-of-mouth communication in tribal markets.

Table 4: Trust in Word-of-Mouth Communication.

Response	Respondents	Percentage
Strongly Agree	34	37.78
Agree	30	33.33
Neutral	16	17.78
Disagree	6	6.67
Strongly Disagree	4	4.44

Statistical Measures: Mean = 3.93, Median = 4, Mode = 4

Interpretation: High mean and median values confirm strong trust in word-of-mouth communication. Mode value of 4 indicates agreement as the most frequent response.

Table 5: Importance of Word-of-Mouth in Buying Decision.

Importance Level	Respondents	Percentage
Very Important	36	40.0
Important	28	31.11
Neutral	14	15.56
Less Important	8	8.89
Not Important	4	4.44

Interpretation: Over 71% respondents consider WOM as important or very important, confirming its decisive role in tribal consumer buying behaviour.

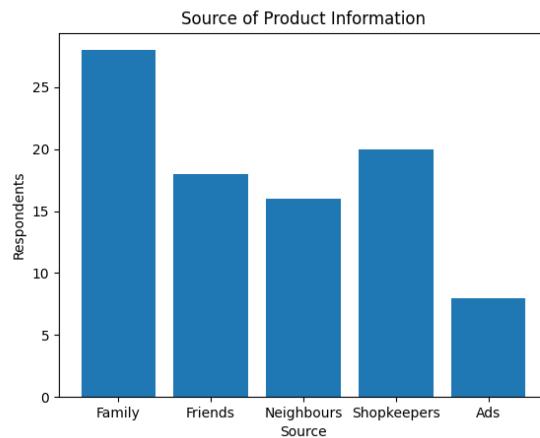


Figure 1: Source of Product Information.

Interpretation: The bar graph clearly shows that family members and shopkeepers are the dominant sources of product information, visually reinforcing the quantitative findings.

Findings of the Study

- Tribal consumers largely depend on family members, neighbours, and shopkeepers for product information.
- Word-of-mouth communication has a strong influence on buying behaviour.
- Negative feedback discourages purchase more strongly than positive feedback encourages it.
- Word-of-mouth communication is considered more reliable than advertisements.
- Community trust plays a significant role in consumer decision-making in tribal areas.

CONCLUSION

The present study demonstrates that word-of-mouth communication plays a pivotal role in shaping the buying behaviour of tribal consumers in Shirpur Taluka of Dhule District. Tribal communities exhibit strong social cohesion, cultural values, and trust-based interpersonal relationships, which make informal communication channels—such as family discussions, neighbour recommendations, and guidance from local shopkeepers—highly influential in purchase decisions. The findings reveal that over 90% of tribal consumers rely on these interpersonal sources for product information, while formal advertising holds minimal sway.

The study also highlights that tribal consumers exhibit a high level of trust in word-of-mouth communication, with positive feedback encouraging product adoption and negative feedback having an even stronger deterrent effect. This underscores the significance of community opinion and social validation in tribal markets. Consumers tend to prefer products endorsed by family elders or respected members of the community, reflecting the deep integration of cultural and social norms in economic decision-making.

Moreover, the research indicates that word-of-mouth communication not only reduces perceived purchase risk but also enhances consumer confidence, making it more effective than conventional advertising methods in influencing buying behaviour. Marketers aiming to target tribal markets must recognize the importance of engaging with local communities, identifying key opinion leaders, and ensuring high product quality to generate positive word-of-mouth. Similarly, policymakers and government agencies can leverage interpersonal communication networks to increase awareness of social welfare schemes, agricultural innovations, and essential services.

The study establishes that word-of-mouth communication is a dominant driver of consumer behaviour in tribal areas, shaping preferences, influencing choices, and reinforcing social norms. Businesses and institutions seeking to operate in such markets should prioritize trust-building, community engagement, and culturally aligned communication strategies over conventional advertising to achieve meaningful impact. The insights from this study provide valuable guidance for designing effective marketing, outreach, and awareness programs in tribal regions.