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INFLUENCE OF ADVERTISING ON THE BEHAVIOUR OF RURAL CONSUMERS A STUDY OF HOW MEDIA EXPOSURE, TRUST, AND PURCHASE INTENTION

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Abstract:
Rural markets constitute an important and growing share of consumption in developing countries, yet little is known about how advertising affects rural purchasing behaviour compared with urban contexts. This study investigates rural consumers' perceptions, trust and reactions to advertising across print, radio, television, outdoor and mobile/social media. A structured survey was administered to 240 rural respondents from three villages/blocks to examine media exposure patterns, factors influencing purchasing decisions, trust in advertised claims, and the relationship between demographic variables and advertising response. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, cross-tabulations, and inferential tests (Pearson correlation and Chi-square). Findings indicate that television and mobile/social media are the key advertising channels for reaching rural households; trust in advertising is moderate and highly sensitive to source credibility and local-language messaging; and price, peer recommendation, and local-language communication influence purchase decisions more strongly than celebrity endorsement. After watching an advertisement, younger respondents have a significantly higher positive purchase intention than older respondents. The paper concludes by discussing future research directions and management implications for rural marketing strategy.

Keywords: *Indian rural consumer behaviour, advertising efficacy, rural marketing, media exposure, purchasing intention, and advertising trust*

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INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

The customer base in rural India, and in the rural parts of developing economies more generally, is large and increasingly monetised, driven by rising rural incomes and the growth of mobile internet companies. "Rural households have a larger disposable budget, and advertisers have tuned their imagery and media mix to local tastes. Even with higher marketing spending, consumer behaviour in rural areas is still different from urban areas. Successful urban advertising does not always mean rural buying behaviour. Therefore, understanding rural advertising response is crucial for academic theory and commercial practice.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Extensive research examines consumer behaviour and advertising effectiveness in urban and general contexts. However, empirical research on the specific factors influencing advertising trust and purchase response among rural consumers, using primary data at the village level, remains limited. Urban assumptions are often uncritically imported into rural efforts, for example, heavy reliance on celebrity endorsements or emotional brand images, without validation of their applicability in rural settings. This mismatch creates a disparity between advertising budgets and behaviour, and between advertising effectiveness in urban and general contexts. This limited empirical research, in turn, constrains understanding of behavioural influence in rural markets.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

- To determine the primary media channels for advertising exposure among rural consumers.
- To analyse the level of faith rural consumers place on advertised claims.
- To study the relative impact of price, product quality claims, celebrity endorsement, local language communication, brand familiarity and peer recommendation on rural purchase decisions.
- To test the association of demographics, in particular age, with advertising trust and purchase intention.
- To propose strategic implications for advertisers and marketers targeting rural consumers.

1.4 Research Hypotheses

H01: There is no significant relationship between the age group of rural consumers and their level of trust in advertising.

H02: There is no significant relationship between the frequency of media exposure and the positive purchase intention of rural consumers.

1.5 Scope and Significance of the Study

This research is limited to product advertising (FMCG, durables, and telecom/financial services) experienced by rural households and excludes business-to-business or agricultural-input advertising. Its significance lies in providing marketers, rural development agencies, and academic researchers with an evidence-based profile of how rural consumers process and act on advertising, supporting more efficient allocation of advertising budgets and more culturally appropriate campaign design.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Rural Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour is the study of how individuals select, purchase, use and dispose of goods and services to satisfy their needs and wants. The study of rural consumer behaviour extends this general framework by considering the particular socio-economic structure of village life, joint family decision-making, community-based trust, seasonality in agrarian income, and relatively lower penetration of formal media compared with interpersonal communication channels. Rural consumers have historically been characterised as value-conscious, brand-loyal once trust is established, and highly influenced by word-of-mouth and opinion leaders within the community.

2.2 Advertising and the Hierarchy-of-Effects Perspective

Classical advertising-effects models describe consumer response as a progression through cognitive, affective, and behavioural stages, broadly defined as awareness, interest, evaluation, and action. This hierarchy is often compressed or reordered in rural contexts. Awareness may spread rapidly through community networks, even when individual media exposure is limited. At the same time, the evaluation stage is frequently outsourced to trusted local figures (shopkeepers, elders, or early adopters) rather than resolved through independent assessment of advertised claims. This implies that media-exposure metrics alone cannot fully explain the effectiveness of rural advertising and must also account for the social mediation of the advertising message.

2.3 Diffusion of Innovation in Rural Markets

To explain the discrepancy between advertising awareness and actual adoption, the diffusion-of-innovation perspective—which describes how new products and ideas spread through a social system via categories of adopters—has been widely applied to rural markets. It is implied that advertising strategy in rural markets

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benefits from working through rather than around local opinion leadership, because rural social structures typically feature well-defined opinion leaders whose formal or informal endorsement of a product frequently carries more behavioural weight than mass-media advertising itself.

2.4 Media Penetration and Channel Preference in Rural Areas

Television has traditionally been documented as the dominant advertising medium in rural households, owing to its audio-visual format that overcomes literacy barriers and its status as a shared family/community viewing activity. Radio remains relevant for agricultural and utility information but has generally declined relative to television in commercial advertising reach. More recent literature highlights the rapid rise of mobile phones and social media as an emerging rural advertising channel, driven by falling smartphone prices and low-cost mobile data. However, print media continues to lag due to literacy and distribution constraints in remote areas.

2.5 Trust, Source Credibility, and Advertising Scepticism

According to source credibility theory, a message's persuasive power depends on the source's credibility. Consumers living in cities are usually more ad-literate than rural consumers. However, because they have less exposure to different forms of advertising, rural consumers may not always be sceptical of advertisements. Rural consumers may be discouraged by repeated exposure to advertisements for products that do not meet expectations. This is especially true for products with experiential risk, such as health and agricultural products. To design effective health communication that changes rural behaviour, use advertising methods that incorporate local culture and languages and are created by community members.

2.6 Price Sensitivity and Value Orientation

For a variety of reasons, rural consumers tend to be more price-sensitive. For example, rural consumers tend to think more about how much a product costs relative to the income the family can earn. Urban consumers, on the other hand, often appear more brand-conscious. Price-sensitive advertising tends to work more effectively in rural markets. Rural consumers also tend to be more price-sensitive when it comes to durability and utility—the trade-off between price and performance matters more to rural consumers than to urban consumers.

2.7 Role of Celebrity Endorsement versus Peer Influence

In city advertising, using celebrities to endorse products is very common. Rural advertising, however, challenges the use of celebrities to influence purchasing behaviours. Relatively speaking, rural consumers are less inclined to follow celebrities' buying behaviours and more likely to be influenced by social and commercial contacts such as relatives, neighbours, and shopkeepers, who are proximate and socially close to them. Therefore, social identity theory and reference group theory of persuasion appear applicable in this context.

2.8 Research Gap

While several studies provide information about rural consumer behaviour and advertising response across geographies, not many studies exist, if at all, in the context of India and in the recent past, that have looked into rural consumer behaviour and preferences integrating media and channel choices, trust, persuasion factors (like price, quality, celebrity endorsements, communication language, etc.), and rural consumer behavioural patterns based on demographics. This research attempts to address this gap through a primary structured survey.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Descriptive-cum-analytical research design with a quantitative cross-sectional survey method was employed for this study. This design was suitable for measuring attitudes, trust levels, and behaviours in the sampled population at a particular point in time. This design also allowed statistical examination of relationships among the variables. Long-term trends and variable changes over time were not pursued in this study.

3.2 Sampling Design

Population: Adult respondents (18 years and above) who are generally involved in making household purchase decisions in rural villages/blocks.

Sample Size: 240 Respondents.

Sampling Technique:

A multi-stage stratified random sampling technique was employed. Three rural blocks were deliberately selected to represent geographic and structural variability (road, electricity, and telecommunication levels) and access (mobile network coverage). Random sampling then selected households. Within selected households, a quota system selected respondents based on their involvement in purchase decisions and balanced representation across gender and age groups.

3.3 Data Collection Method

The primary data were collected using an interview schedule designed to elicit responses in a predefined manner. A few literate respondents were given a copy of the questionnaire to fill out themselves. Before the study, the questionnaire was translated from English into the local language to ensure respondents could understand and respond to the survey questions. The questionnaire was pretested to assess understanding and ensure it captured

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the variables of interest. The questionnaire was shortened after some minor rephrasing.

3.4 Instrument Design

The questionnaire consisted of four parts. The first part included respondents' personal details. The second part covered the different media the respondents come across. The third part used a Likert scale to assess respondents' opinions on the various factors that influence their purchase decisions. The fourth and final part assessed respondents' opinions about advertising and their intention to purchase the advertised product.

3.5 Data Analysis Techniques

Descriptive statistics (i.e. frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation) to characterise the sample and summarise responses.

Cross-tabulation to assess distribution of trust & intention to buy, relative to demographics.

Chi-square test of independence to test H01 (association between age group and advertising trust).

Pearson's correlation to assess H02: intention to buy and media exposure.

All quantitative analyses used standard methods; $\alpha = 0.05$ was used throughout.

3.6 Reliability and Validity

Internal consistency of the Likert Scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.81$). Researchers evaluated Content Validity.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

A description of primary survey data (N = 240) utilising descriptive and inferential statistics, supported by charts and graphs.

4.1 Demographic Profile of Respondents

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 240)

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	138	57.5
	Female	102	42.5
Age Group	18-25 years	48	20.0
	26-35 years	62	25.8
	36-45 years	54	22.5
	46-55 years	44	18.3
	56 years and above	32	13.3
Education	No formal education	31	12.9
	Primary/Secondary	104	43.3
	Higher secondary	68	28.3
	Graduate and above	37	15.4
Occupation	Agriculture/Allied	112	46.7
	Small business/Trade	46	19.2
	Salaried/Government	28	11.7
	Daily wage labour	39	16.3
	Other/Homemaker	15	6.3
Monthly Household Income (INR)	Below 10,000	58	24.2
	10,000-20,000	97	40.4
	20,001-30,000	56	23.3
	Above 30,000	29	12.1

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Male respondents comprise 57.5% of the sample, and representation across working-age groups is good, with 25.8% of the sample comprising the 26 to 35 age group. As would be expected in a rural population, 46.7% of the sample is employed in agricultural and allied occupations. The majority (40.4%) of the sample reports a monthly household income between INR 10,000 and INR 20,000. Thus, the sample is value-conscious and, specifically, lower-middle class, and is therefore appropriate for studying reasons for value-conscious purchase behaviour.

4.2 Media Exposure and Channel Preference

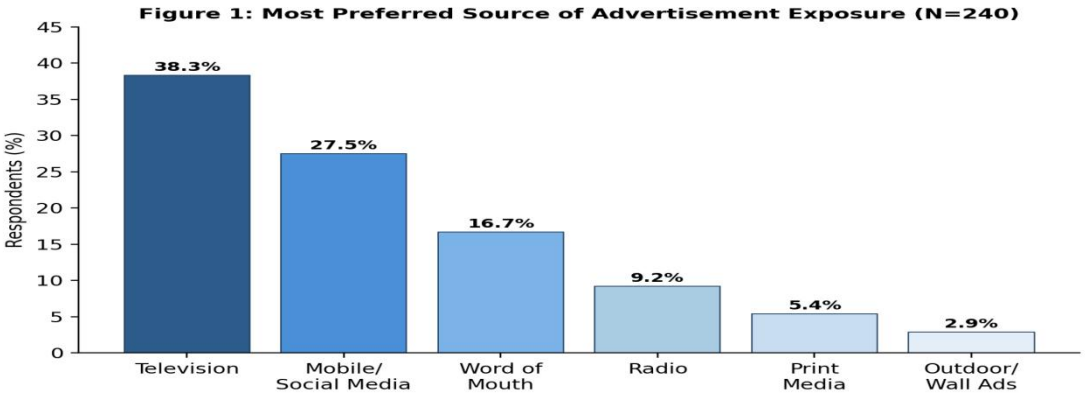


Figure 1: Most Preferred Source of Advertisement Exposure (N = 240)

Television is the main advertisement channel, according to 38.3% of the participants. Mobile phone and social network advertisements are the second most popular, with 27.5%. Television is typically accessible only in urban areas, but rural areas are rapidly adopting mobile broadband and, therefore, mobile advertising. Rural people are also heavily influenced by word-of-mouth communication (16.7%) and less so by radio (9.2%). Print ads and billboards are largely ineffective because of limited access and illiteracy (5.4% and 2.9%, respectively). Outdoor advertisements are slightly more relevant in the rural setting (2.9%).

4.3 Trust in Advertising

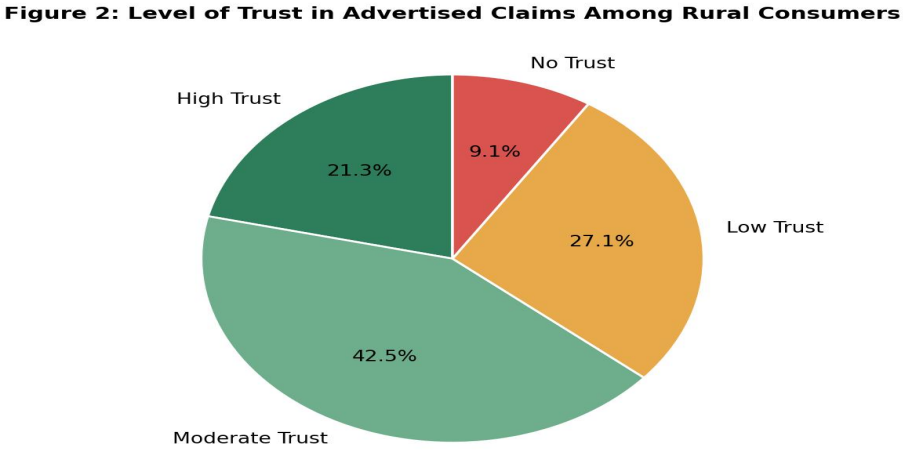


Figure 2: Level of Trust in Advertised Claims Among Rural Consumers

Overall trust in advertising is moderate. 42.5% of the respondents reported moderately trusting advertisements. A slightly smaller proportion, 21.3% of respondents, reported significantly trusting advertisements. The remaining 36.2% of respondents reported that they did not trust advertisements or that their trust levels ranged from slightly to moderately. Perceived credibility of the advertising source influenced trust levels. Similarly, a plurality of rural respondents reported negative experiences with products that did not live up to the claims made in advertising, particularly in the health, agri-input, and personal-care categories.

4.4 Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

Table 2: Mean Scores of Factors Influencing Purchase Decision (5-point Likert Scale)

Factor	Mean Score (out	Std. Deviation	Rank

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	of 5)		
Price / Value for Money	4.32	0.61	1
Local Language Use in Advertisement	4.18	0.68	2
Peer / Family Recommendation	4.05	0.72	3
Brand Familiarity	3.74	0.79	4
Product Quality Claims	3.61	0.83	5
Celebrity Endorsement	2.89	0.95	6

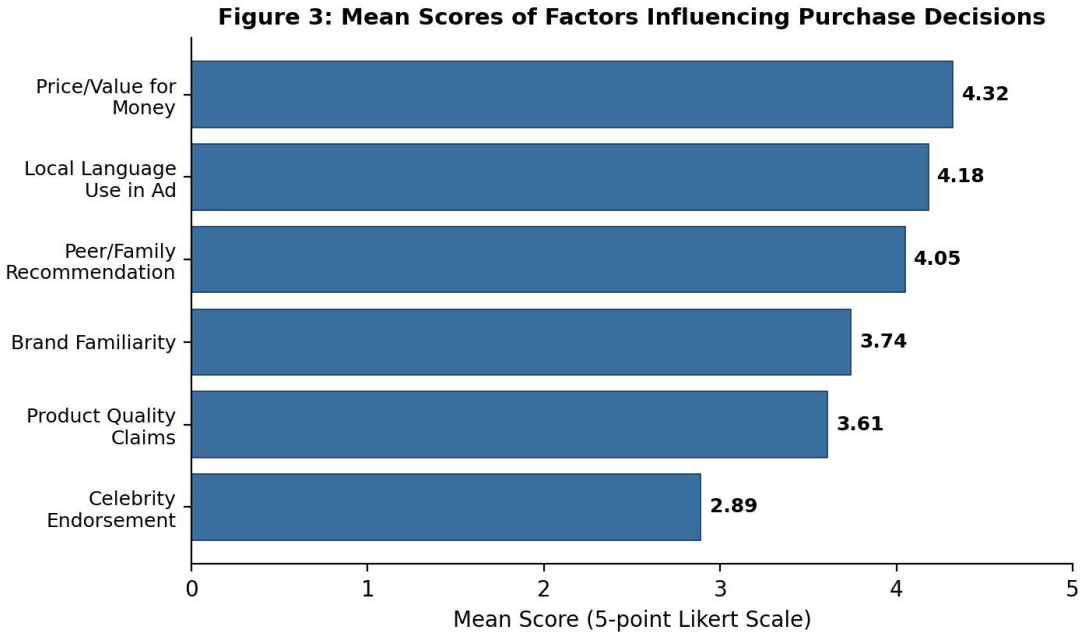


Figure 3: Mean Scores of Factors Influencing Purchase Decisions

The elements that most influence purchase decisions are price/value (M = 4.32), communication in the local language (M = 4.18), and peer/family recommendations (M = 4.05). The least important factor is celebrity endorsement (M = 2.89), which also has the highest standard deviation (SD = 0.95). This suggests that celebrity-endorsed advertisements do not influence the sample and supports Reference Group theory, which states that consumers are influenced by people who are socially near them, not by people who are socially far, such as a celebrity.

4.5 Age Group and Purchase Intention

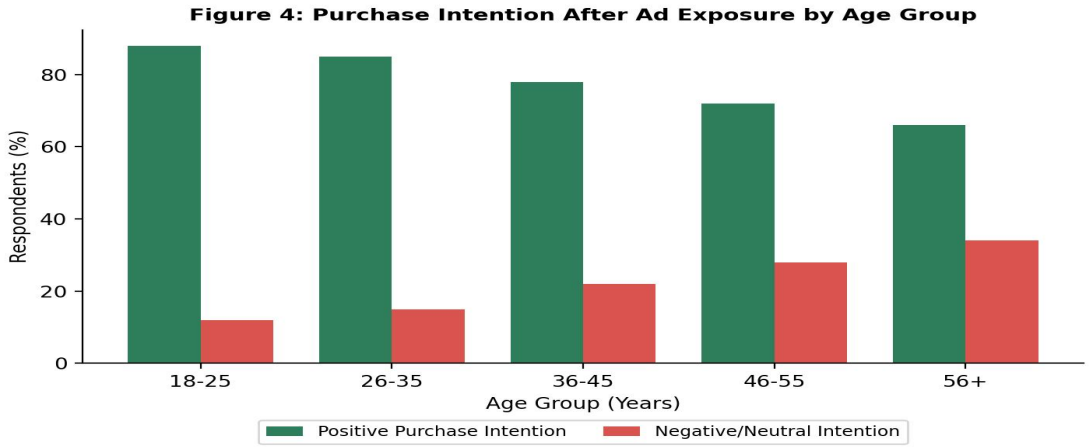


Figure 4: Purchase Intention After Ad Exposure by Age Group

The effect of advertisement exposure on purchase intention is expected to decline with age. Respondents under 25 years of age showed an expected purchase intention of 88%. Respondents aged 56 and above showed an expected purchase intention of 66%. Younger rural respondents are likely more influenced by advertisements. This might be because younger respondents are more experienced and more exposed to different media than

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the older respondents.

4.6 Hypothesis Testing

4.6.1 H01 - Age Group and Trust in Advertising

Table 3: Chi-square Test - Association Between Age Group and Trust in Advertising

Test	Value	df	p-value	Result
Pearson Chi-square	18.647	12	0.041	Significant at $\alpha = 0.05$

Since the calculated p-value (0.041) is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis H01. This indicates a significant relationship between rural consumers' age group and their level of trust in advertisements. Respondents in the lower age group (15-34) tend to have a higher level of trust in advertisements. In contrast, respondents in the older age group (65 and above) tend to trust advertisements less.

4.6.2 H02 - Media Exposure Frequency and Purchase Intention

Table 4: Correlation Between Media Exposure Frequency and Purchase Intention

Test	Value	p-value	Result
Pearson Correlation (r)	0.436	0.000	Significant positive correlation

A moderate, positive, significant correlation was found between how often participants were exposed to the media and their positive purchase intention ($r = 0.436$, $p < 0.05$). Therefore, the null hypothesis H02 is rejected. The results show that higher advertising exposure is associated with higher positive purchase intention among rural respondents. Still, the correlation coefficient indicates that exposure frequency does not fully determine rural respondents' purchase intention, supporting the multi-factor influence pattern shown in Section 4.4.

5. Key Findings

About two-thirds of the advertising rural consumers see comes through television and mobile phones/social media. Of the remaining advertising that rural consumers see, word-of-mouth is the next largest source (16.7%).
Rural advertising is socially mediated. 36.2% of respondents said they did not trust advertisements or barely trusted them.
Price (or value for money) and local-language communication are the most salient factors influencing rural consumers' purchase decisions.
Leveraging celebrity endorsement in an advertisement is the least effective strategy. Furthermore, the strategy is quite unstable.
Based on the results of this study, consumers aged 56 and older were less trusting of advertisements than younger consumers.
A moderate, positive relationship exists between exposure frequency and intention to purchase the product.
Based on the results of this study, purchase intention was 66% for the 56-and-over age group.

6. Discussion

The results help confirm and build on the findings mentioned in Section 2 of the literature review. As noted in prior studies, audio-visual media, especially TV, helps household or community members gather to watch programs. The study highlighted the growing role of mobile phones and social media and illustrated the need for advertisers to understand how rural consumers access and use different communication channels. Many rural consumers are mobile phone-first or mobile phone-only consumers.
Advertisers must consider how best to develop marketing communication campaigns that utilise different channels. Based on the study, many rural consumers appear to trust advertisements less and find local-language communications more persuasive. Advertisers who localise language and imagery are likely to overcome baseline scepticism more effectively than those deploying generic, urban-styled, or translated campaigns.

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Reference group theory posits that, in rural areas, people are more influenced by people they have more social closeness with than by a celebrity with whom they have no social contact. It also shows that a rural area shouldn't be viewed as a single homogeneous market. These findings suggest that marketing dollars should focus more on communities and retailers than on a celebrity-endorsed marketing campaign. As a result, older people may be more receptive to a new product than younger people. People in rural areas are not always influenced by constant exposure. The way a product is presented, by focusing on a price or other aspects, can influence a purchase. Increasing exposure frequency has only a small effect on purchase.

7. Managerial Implications and Recommendations

- Focus the channel mix on television and mobile/social for rural campaigns. Use word-of-mouth or community-based activities to support the campaign and build message credibility.
- For campaigns with more limited budgets, use local language communications. Use local language advertisements to build trust and increase the likelihood of purchase.
- Given the importance of price and value in the campaign, communicate value in the advertisement.
- Use opinion leaders to conduct product demonstrations and engage retailers to build confidence in the product in the target community, rather than using celebrities to promote the product.
- Use realistic expectations in product claims to build confidence in the product.
- Use the budget to place a greater number of product promotions for the rural campaign. Use mobile/social and television to communicate the campaign. Break down the campaign by age and use different channels to communicate it.
- Carefully consider the number of times a message is communicated. Evaluate message content to improve campaign quality.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, because it is cross-sectional, it can't show the pathway between exposure to advertising and the purchase of the advertised product. A longitudinal or experimental design would be better to show this. Second, the three purposively sampled rural blocks represent as wide a range as possible. Still, they do not represent the infrastructure, literacy levels, and cultures of other rural areas in the country. Third, intention to purchase may not always translate into actual purchase because of social-desirability bias or post-hoc rationalisation. Studies can be designed to minimise these limitations. Studies may also help address other limitations. These may include Longitudinal studies to assess actual purchase, as well as studies focused on various product categories (such as FMCG, durables, or agri-inputs). Some of these studies may also assess how integrated mobile and social media are across different areas of rural India.

9. Conclusion

This study investigates how rural consumers are exposed to and respond to advertising. It aims to fill a research gap on primary research on rural advertising in India. The study found that rural consumers are most commonly exposed to advertising through television and mobile/social media. Trust in advertising was moderate. Trust levels were related to a consumer's age. Price/value communication and advertisements in the consumer's native language were more effective at influencing consumers' purchase decisions than celebrity-endorsed advertisements. The study found that the more exposed a consumer was to advertisements, the more likely they were to purchase the product. The study rejected the hypotheses. Based on these findings, advertisers seeking to reach the rural market should embrace rural advertising methods and strategies and move away from adapting urban advertising.

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