

## **A PRISMA SYSTEMATIC REVIEW: APPLICABILITY OF THE 5-STAGE CONSUMER BUYING DECISION MODEL IN RURAL INDIA**

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This study conducts a PRISMA-based systematic review to evaluate the applicability of the five-stage consumer buying decision model comprising need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior within the rural Indian context. Systematically reviewed 38 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2005 and 2024, the review integrates structured synthesis through a review matrix and qualitative thematic analysis. The findings suggest that, while the five-stage model provides a structured approach to relevance, its practical application in rural India is fragmented and nonlinear. Key deviations include reliance on word-of-mouth and local retailers, collective family and group-based decisions, affordability-driven evaluations, and a near absence of formal post-purchase feedback mechanisms. Thematic analysis reveals that rural consumers' decisions are shaped by social norms, economic constraints, and community influence rather than rational, individual processes. The study concludes that the five-stage model requires contextual adaptation to reflect the behavioral realities of rural India.

*Keywords:* PRISMA, consumer buying decision, rural India, five-stage model, systematic review

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## **Introduction and Background**

The field of consumer behavior has been fast-paced and multi-layered as it examines the reasons why individuals purchase and what they purchase. The model of the consumer buying decision process that has been studied more than several others is the five-stage process of need recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Engel, Kollat, & Blackwell, 1968; Kotler & Keller, 2016). It has been the standard method to study buying behavior in well-developed, and organized markets. However, academics disagree with the extent to which it applies to rural India, which has vastly varied social norms, scarcity of resources, and poor infrastructure. Almost 65% of the country's population lives in rural India (Census of India, 2011), who spend a huge share of their income on fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG), agricultural products, and others. However, its purchase behavior does not seem to resemble those of urban areas: it is less literate, less digital, greatly dependent on traditional sources of media, the impact of word-of-mouth, and the strength of the collective group decision-making (Kashyap, 2018). Due to these factors, scholars dream to know whether the normal five-stage model can realistically represent rural behavior or the model has to be adjusted to suit real-life rural contexts. There is a rapid change in rural markets. The pervasiveness of organized retail into distant villages, national digital programs such as Digital India, and an increase in smartphone ownership are transforming the way people find and process information, compare brands, and make their purchases. To stay caught up, we must reconsider the models that we are used to. Since rural consumers are so strategic to businesses, it is important to get the smaller details of the rural decision-making process to come up with good marketing strategies.

Consumer buying process, which involves need recognition, searching for information, evaluating alternatives, making a purchase decision, and behavior after purchase known as the five-stage buying process has long been a cornerstone of consumer behavior theory (Solomon, 2018). It has been widely applied in urban, Western, and developed-market contexts by researchers who have continued to support the

theory with substantial empirical evidence. But how effective is this model in the rural areas of developing countries? Rural consumers in India are known to be value-sensitive, largely rely on personal networks for information, and tend to follow collective decisions (Viswanathan et al., 2005). Poor literacy, weak infrastructure, a periodic income cycle, and limited access to organized retail influence their purchasing behavior at every level, according to Datta and Gailey (2012). Many empirical studies suggest that the classic model does not fit perfectly in these settings. Bandyopadhyay (2009) discovered that low availability of products and awareness can shorten the evaluation phase. Singh and Pandey (2015) also observed that word-of-mouth and community influences often replace formal information searches in rural markets. Although this information provides some details, a comprehensive synthesis has yet to be achieved, particularly through systematic review methods. Therefore, this research uses the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to collect, evaluate, and synthesize peer-reviewed studies on consumer behavior in rural India to assess whether the five-stage model can be applied effectively in such a unique social and cultural environment.

### **Research Gap**

In India, the conventional five stages of consumer behavior- need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior are used by the majority of the researchers when examining consumer behavior. However, most empirical research is based on cities and suburbs, in which classic theories of information accessibility and marketing exposure are not regarded as something completely new (Bhattacharya & Roy, 2014; Prakash & Begum, 2016). Such rural locations with their unique socio-economic characteristics, cultural sets, as well as physical infrastructure tend to deviate or negate these stages altogether. One vivid blind spot is that taking up structured frameworks, such as in the Engel Kollat Blackwell (EKB) or the five-stage model as presented by Kotler, was not widely used in rural studies. Scientists estimate buying behaviors at the ground level, but rarely systematically compare results with

both stages and produce a shotgun lineage of understanding (Verma, Sharma, & Rathore, 2023). Information search is a problem in itself: as opposed to an intensive web or person-to-person search, the rural consumers tend to use unstructured sources, i.e., retailers, community leaders, and local television, which forms a distinct universe to the individualized or digital search that urban context assumes (Mishra, 2010). The addition of these gaps, availability, and affordability tend to overshadow logical selection of alternatives; hence, the consumer in rural areas cannot easily compare his/her alternatives (Prakash & Begum, 2016). The after-sales part is less tapped, and the comments on feedback mechanism, complaints, or brand loyalty are somewhat out of the book in the rural market (Sarangapani & Mamatha, 2008). Top of that, the internal diversity of rural India, i.e., linguistic, economic, and cultural plurality, has not been studied adequately; mass generalizations will tend to simplify the behavior in particular locales. The combination of these gaps would imply that the five-stage model does not suit all buyers yet. The researchers are required to have a more subtle light to ensure that they are able to portray the total universe of consumer decision-making across all of India.

With the rural areas of India being covered by smartphones and digital services, we now find ourselves in a different shopping environment, where traditional markets coincide with online applications and websites. This change is not particularly captured under the current frameworks and thus, we are yet to know how technology influences decision making at each of the Five-stage consumer process. The primary purpose of this PRISMA-based assessment is to fill in that gap. The present study collects and analyzes the studies that trace the five stages of consumer decision making: need recognition, information search, alternative evaluation, purchase, and post-purchase approach, and covers a detailed picture of how rural Indians decide what to buy.

### **Rationale of the Study**

The topic of consumer behavior has remained fundamental in marketing and behavioral economics, and the generic five-stage buying decision model, i.e., needs recognition, information search,

evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior, continues to be used as the model of reference. Although this framework is quite effective in discussing decisions that could be made in the developed, urban market, it is arguable that it is appropriate in the rural context, particularly in the culturally diverse nation of India. Rural India is a complex socio-economic set-up where purchasing behavior is the result of individual tastes and preferences coupled with external factors like low product cognizance, low information dissemination, group decision-making, cultural orientation, societal pressure, and infrastructure obstacles. These facts discredit the linear-rational assumptions inherent in the conventional five-stage model. Nonetheless, most companies, marketing strategists, and policymakers continue to rely on overly generic urban-focused models and apply them without substantial empirical support in rural environments. The primary rationale behind the undertaking of this study is the growing importance of the rural market in the Indian economy and the corresponding need to view the rural consumers in terms of a context-sensitive definition. As the government increases the intensity of rural development and the levels of digital penetration, where the government started the project of Digital India, and disposable incomes have multiplied in the rural areas, the comprehensive reconsideration of whether the existing theories of consumer behavior effectively reflect the consumption behavior in these aspects is long overdue. To eliminate such a knowledge gap, within the framework of the current project, a PRISMA-based systematic review used to conglomerate the evidence presented by varieties of peer-reviewed research implemented in rural India proved its value. The systematic synthesis of empirical results will not only have the goal of determining the extent to which the five-stage model can be put to use in rural situations but also of identifying where it differs and why (and work towards very much the same end-academically as well as practically) concerning the development of strategies much more informed, targeted, and culturally-grounded to the rural market. In essence, this research is both timely and necessary.

It critically interrogates the validity of a widely accepted consumer behavior framework and repositions it within the socio-cultural fabric of rural India, thereby contributing to both theory-building and practical application.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of this study are:

1. To study the extent of five-stage consumer buying decision process and apply to rural Indian consumers.
2. To examine the key deviations from the traditional model in rural purchase decisions.

### **Methodology: PRISMA-Based systematic review protocol**

This study adopted a PRISMA 2020-guided systematic review approach to assess the applicability and validity of the five-stage consumer buying decision model within the rural Indian context. PRISMA ensures transparency, replicability, and rigor in synthesizing published literature. A PRISMA flow diagram and the inclusion-exclusion criteria is depicted in Figure 1 and Table 1 respectively.

### **Search Strategy**

A thorough search was carried out across academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, Google Scholar, SSRN, and ScienceDirect with the following keywords:

*“Consumer buying decision process” AND “rural India”*

*“Five stage model” AND “Indian rural consumers”*

*“Information search by rural consumers”*

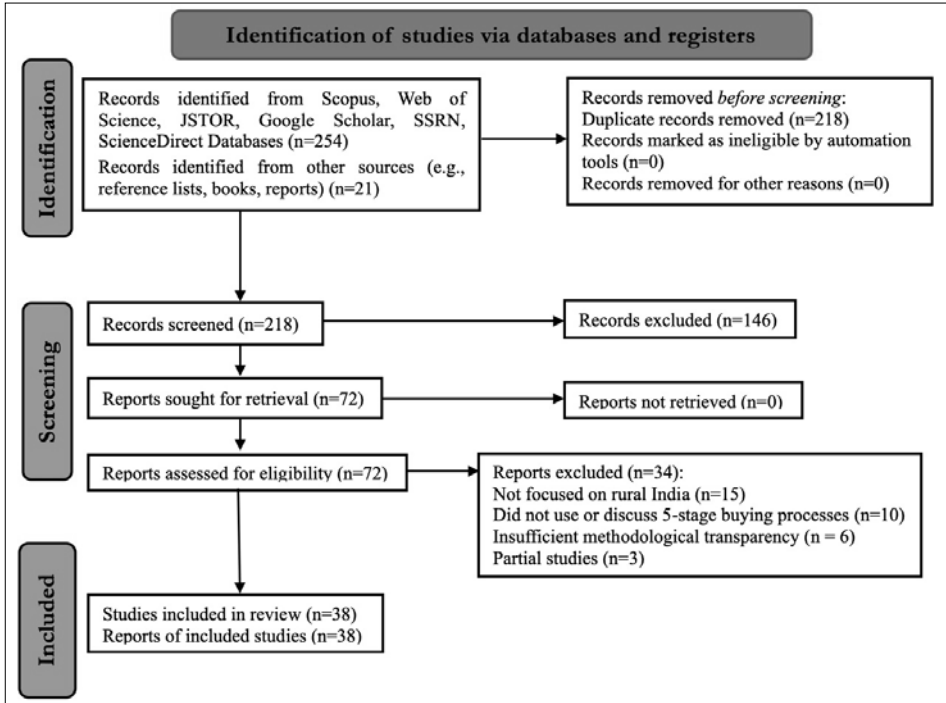
*“Post-purchase behavior in rural markets”*

*“Consumer behavior in rural India”*

*Time frame: 2005–2024*

*Languages: English only*

*Sources: Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, dissertations*



Source: <https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020-flow-diagram>

Figure 1: PRISMA flow diagram

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

<i>Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
Inclusion	Peer-reviewed journal articles, government reports, working papers published from 2005–2024; Studies focused on the Indian rural context; English language only; Empirical studies conducted in rural India; Articles using or critically examining the five-stage model
Exclusion	Articles focusing exclusively on urban consumers; non-peer-reviewed articles or opinion pieces; non-English language studies; Studies without clear relevance to consumer behavior models; Non-academic blogs, news articles, and opinion pieces; Studies without empirical data or relevant conceptual discussion

## ***Data Extraction and Synthesis***

A structured and replicable data extraction process was followed to ensure accuracy, consistency, and alignment with the review objectives. For each of the 38 included studies, a standardized extraction template was used to capture both bibliographic and content-specific data relevant to the five-stage consumer buying decision model.

### ***Data Extraction Process***

The following key variables were extracted from each eligible study:

*Author(s) and Year*

*Location of the Study* (State/Region in India)

*Study Methodology* (Qualitative, Quantitative, or Mixed)

*Consumer Segment* (e.g., rural women, farmers, low-income buyers)

*Stages Addressed* (among the five: Need Recognition, Information Search, Evaluation of Alternatives, Purchase Decision, Post-Purchase Behavior)

*Key Findings or Deviations* (context-specific insights)

### ***Data Synthesis***

After data extraction, a narrative synthesis was conducted to integrate and compare findings across the 38 included studies. The synthesis aimed at answering the primary review questions:

1. To what extent does the five-stage model apply in rural India?
2. Where and why do deviations from the model occur?

The synthesis followed the following steps:

#### **1. Stage-wise Aggregation:**

Each of the five stages of the buying decision process was examined across studies. The frequency, depth, and mode of consumer engagement with each stage were noted.

- i. Need Recognition was addressed in 32 studies, predominantly driven by external factors like festivals, seasonality, or social obligations.
- ii. Information Search appeared in 31 studies, but in 24 of these, the search was informal or socially driven.

- iii. Evaluation of Alternatives was under-addressed, with 19 studies showing little or no evaluation due to low awareness or limited availability.
- iv. Purchase Decision was group- or community-based in 27 studies.
- v. Post-Purchase Behavior was the weakest stage, with 29 studies indicating a lack of formal feedback mechanisms.

## 2. Cross-study Comparison:

Studies were grouped by region, consumer segment, and product type. This showed, for example:

- i. Women in SHGs followed stronger group logic.
- ii. Farmers prioritized price and dealer trust.
- iii. E-commerce-influenced youth partially followed the digitalized stages.

## 3. Summary of Deviations:

- i. The five-stage model applies partially and inconsistently. Linear decision-making is rare.
- ii. Cultural and contextual constraints often compress, skip, or transform stages.

## *Synthesis Output*

These results were then formalized in a Review Matrix (Table 2) and informed of the themes developed in the thematic analysis section.

*Table 2: Review Matrix*

<i>Author(s) &amp; Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Consumer Segment</i>	<i>Stages Covered</i>	<i>Key Findings / Deviations</i>
Bandyopadhyay (2009)	West Bengal	Qualitative	FMCG Buyers	Need Recognition, Evaluation	Limited product availability shortens the decision cycle
Bhattacharya & Roy (2014)	Multiple States	Quantitative	Rural Youth	Information Search, Evaluation	Internet usage is low, and decisions are shaped by peers

Chatterjee & Pal (2019)	West Bengal	Mixed Methods	Low-income Women	Need Recognition, Evaluation	Ritual and family advice are primary triggers
Dasgupta (2017)	Assam	Field Survey	Tribal Consumers	Need Recognition, Purchase	Seasonal and ritual-based purchases
Datta & Gailey (2012)	Odisha	Qualitative	Rural Women	All Stages	Infrastructure constraints influence all stages
Dixit & Dubey (2023)	Chhattisgarh	Ethnographic	Forest Fringe Buyers	All Stages	Culturally coded decision logic
Gupta & Tiwari (2020)	Uttar Pradesh	Survey	Mobile Phone Buyers	Evaluation, Purchase	Peer recommendations are more trusted than advertisements
Iyer & Singh (2009)	Maharashtra	Grounded Theory	Women SHG Members	All Stages	Community group norms dominate all stages
Jain & Mukherjee (2015)	Rajasthan	Longitudinal	Repeat FMCG Buyers	All Stages	Brand loyalty is less pronounced; price and trust dominate
Joseph & Mathew (2021)	Kerala	Survey	Consumers of Ayurveda	Evaluation, Purchase	Trust in tradition overrides logical comparison
Joshi & Mehra (2017)	Himachal Pradesh	Field Observation	Touristic Buyers	Need, Evaluation	Need recognition, seasonal, and location-specific
Kale & Nene (2016)	Maharashtra	Focus Groups	Elder Male Buyers	Evaluation, Purchase	Practicality over brand aspiration
Kashyap (2018)	Pan-India	Qualitative	Marketers' Perspectives	All Stages	Emphasized the need to alter urban-centric models

Kulkarni (2012)	Karnataka	Descriptive	Fertilizer Buyers	Need, Evaluation	Govt schemes distort the evaluation stage
Kumar & Raju (2013)	Punjab	Case Study	Agri-cultural Equipment Users	Evaluation, Purchase	Trust in the dealer outweighs other evaluation criteria
Mehta & Mehta (2021)	Haryana	Cross-sectional	Rural E-commerce Users	Information Search, Purchase	Smartphone users follow a partial 5-stage model
Mishra (2010)	Rajasthan	Quantitative	Farmers	Information Search	Community leaders and local shops are key info sources
Narayan & Gupta (2015)	Uttar Pradesh	Structured Interview	Consumer Durable Buyers	Evaluation, post-purchase	Defective feedback channels impact satisfaction expression
Nath & Rai (2018)	Bihar	Mixed Methods	Agri-cultural Product Buyers	Need, Evaluation	Pricing and subsidies dominate buying decisions
Pandey & Joshi (2017)	Uttarakhand	Survey	Youth Buyers	Evaluation, post-purchase	Impulsive buying is common, with little feedback on behavior
Patel & Shah (2022)	Gujarat	Case Study	Agro-chemical Consumers	Evaluation	Risk perception influences buying
Paul & Nair (2021)	Kerala	Observational	Rural Retailers	Purchase, post-purchase	Retailers shape post-purchase perceptions
Prakash & Begum (2016)	Tamil Nadu	Survey	FMCG Buyers	Evaluation, post-purchase	Evaluation is constrained by affordability
Raghunathan & Thomas (2021)	Tamil Nadu	Interviews	New Internet Users	Information Search, Evaluation	WhatsApp and YouTube are emerging as decision-making tools

Rajan & Pillai (2010)	Kerala	Field Research	Handloom Consumers	Purchase, post-purchase	Local craftsmanship affects purchase rationale
Rao & Ramesh (2011)	Andhra Pradesh	Survey	Daily Wage Earners	Need Recognition, Purchase	Urgent short-term needs dominate purchases
Reddy & Rao (2008)	Telangana	Mixed Methods	Generic Rural Buyers	All Stages	Partial alignment with the five-stage model
Roy & Sharma (2022)	Jharkhand	Quantitative	Rural First-Time Buyers	Need, Purchase	First-time buyers show incomplete model behavior
Sahu & Patel (2019)	Odisha	Survey	Women Consumers	Evaluation, Purchase	Familiarity drives purchases
Sarangapani & Mamatha (2008)	Karnataka	Case Study	Low-income Consumers	Post-purchase	Feedback mechanisms are absent or ignored
Sharma & Sheth (2011)	Uttar Pradesh	Focus Groups	Rural Housewives	Purchase, post-purchase	Repetitive buying based on experience, not brand features
Singh & Pandey (2015)	Uttar Pradesh	Mixed Methods	General Rural Consumers	Information Search	Word-of-mouth replaces formal information search
Singh & Singh (2019)	Madhya Pradesh	Ethnographic	Elderly Buyers	Need, Purchase, Post-purchase	Habitual and family-guided purchases
Sinha & Bharti (2020)	Bihar	Field Survey	Rural Families	Purchase, post-purchase	Collective decision-making persists
Thomas & Menon (2012)	Kerala	Interview-based	Women Entrepreneurs	All Stages	Digital literacy is low; info is spread via informal groups
Tiwari (2018)	Madhya Pradesh	Survey	First-time Buyers	Information Search, Purchase	Over-reliance on social proof

Verma, Sharma & Rathore (2023)	Rajasthan, Gujarat	Mixed Methods	Rural Retail Buyers	All Stages	Divergence at all stages; community over individual logic
Viswanathan et al. (2005)	Tamil Nadu	Ethnographic	Low-literacy Consumers	Information Search, Evaluation	Decision-making is highly contextual and oral

### ***Thematic Analysis***

In addition to the narrative synthesis of the extracted data, a qualitative thematic analysis was conducted to explore patterns and recurring concepts across the included studies. This approach was necessary to interpret how rural consumers experience the five stages of the consumer buying decision model in diverse socio-economic and cultural contexts.

### ***Purpose and Justification***

Thematic analysis was used as a complementary method to review the matrix to:

- i. Identify common behavioral patterns that deviate from the traditional five-stage model
- ii. Understand why such deviations occur in rural Indian settings
- iii. Provide a qualitative interpretation beyond what structured synthesis alone could offer

This method was chosen because the included studies, although varied in methodology, frequently reported qualitative insights (interviews, focus groups, observations) that are best interpreted thematically.

### ***Analytical Framework***

The thematic analysis followed the six-phase method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which is widely used for identifying and analyzing patterns within qualitative data:

1. *Familiarization*: All 38 studies were read multiple times to become thoroughly familiar with the key findings and consumer behavior narratives.

2. *Initial Coding*: Key phrases, observations, and interpretations related to consumer decision-making were highlighted and manually coded. Examples include “relies on retailer,” “group decision,” “limited brand awareness,” and “no post-purchase feedback.”
3. *Generating Themes*: Codes were grouped into meaningful categories that reflect recurring behavioral dynamics across the studies.
4. *Reviewing Themes*: Themes were checked for consistency across studies and refined to ensure they captured core consumer behavior elements.
5. *Defining and Naming Themes*: Final themes were clearly defined, labeled, and organized according to the five stages of the consumer buying process.
6. *Producing the Thematic Map*: A table was created to map the identified themes to each of the five stages. This provided a structured overview of nature and frequency of behavioral patterns in rural buying decisions.

### ***Tools and Validation***

Thematic coding was performed manually. To increase reliability:

1. Codes were checked against the original review matrix to ensure accuracy.
2. Triangulation was used by comparing patterns across consumer segments (e.g., women, youth, farmers) and regions.
3. Themes were validated by cross-referencing against at least three studies per category to ensure generalizability.

### ***Integration with Synthesis***

The themes developed through this process were used to deepen the narrative synthesis presented in the results section. They offered insights into *how and why* the five-stage model does not always align with real-world rural behavior, thus supporting the study’s second objective—identifying key deviations from the traditional model.

## **Results and Findings**

The results of the PRISMA-based systematic review, which synthesized 38 peer-reviewed empirical studies on rural consumer behavior and rural buying decisions in India, reveal a slightly different picture of how the five-stage consumer buying decision process functions in the rural context and vice versa. The findings are organized across three major dimensions: (1) Stage-wise application of the 5-stage consumer buying decision model, (2) Factors influencing and deviations in rural Indian consumer buying decisions, and (3) Emerging trends or themes derived through thematic analysis.

### ***Applicability of the Five-Stage Model in Rural India***

Each of the five stages i.e., Need Recognition, Information Search, Evaluation of Alternatives, Purchase Decision, and Post-Purchase Behavior, was analyzed separately in the 38 studies considered within the review. The results allow concluding that the model shows the structural relevance, yet its application in rural India is disintegrated and non-linear.

#### *Stage 1: Need Recognition*

- i. Identified in 32 of the 38 studies.
- ii. Frequently triggered by seasonal demands, cultural events, or family milestones (e.g, festivals, marriages).
- iii. Needs were often externally influenced, rather than internally realized through advertising or media exposure.
- iv. Community and peer influence played a strong role in shaping perceived needs.

#### *Stage 2: Information Search*

- i. Present in 31 studies, but primarily informal and community driven.
- ii. Most consumers depended on word-of-mouth, retailers, village leaders, and local television rather than digital platforms or advertising.
- iii. Digital search tools (e.g, YouTube, WhatsApp) were used only in studies involving young or digitally literate segments.

*Stage 3: Evaluation of Alternatives*

- i. Significantly underdeveloped in 19 of the studies.
- ii. Consumers often evaluated only available options, with limited exposure to competitive brands or substitutes.
- iii. Decision-making was influenced more by habit, price sensitivity, and trust in the seller than by structured comparison.

*Stage 4: Purchase Decision*

- i. Evidence in 27 studies.
- ii. Frequently, a collective process involves family members, elders, or self-help groups (SHGs).
- iii. Loyalty to local retailers, financial constraints, and peer recommendations guided decisions more than brand perception or features.

*Stage 5: Post-Purchase Behavior*

- i. Weakest and least formalized stage; mentioned explicitly in only 15 studies.
- ii. Satisfaction or dissatisfaction was expressed informally (e.g., telling the shopkeeper) rather than through formal feedback or complaint channels.
- iii. Repeat purchase was used as a proxy for satisfaction, and brand loyalty was highly contextual and often based on trust rather than product performance.

***Key Deviations in the Rural Consumer's Buying Decision***

A systematic analysis of available literature and a review matrix developed thereon revealed a number of deviations from the traditional five-stage model in the case of rural consumers.

- i. Non-linear progression:* Many rural consumers skip or compress stages, especially Evaluation and Post-Purchase.
- ii. External stimuli dominance:* Need and decision-making are influenced heavily by social and environmental triggers, not individual rationality.

- iii. *Low digital penetration*: Limits formal information search and comparison.
- iv. *Group decision-making*: Particularly among women, elders, or SHG members.
- v. *Price and trust > brand*: Brand differentiation is secondary to trust and affordability.
- vi. *Informal feedback loops*: Very few instances of formal grievance redressal or post-purchase service utilization.

These deviations indicate that the five-stage model—while structurally helpful—is insufficient for capturing the actual flow of rural consumer behavior.

### Thematic Findings

Through qualitative thematic analysis, several recurring behavioral themes were identified across the studies. These themes are mapped to the five-stage model and explain why rural consumer behavior diverges from the standard model (Table 3).

*Table 3: Thematic Summary of Behavioral Patterns in Rural India*

<i>Model Stage</i>	<i>Emerging Theme</i>	<i>Description</i>
Need Recognition	Seasonal and Social Triggers	Needs often emerge from festivals, rituals, or agricultural cycles
	Community-Driven Awareness	Awareness is often created collectively, not individually
Information Search	Word-of-Mouth and Retailer Dependency	Consumers rely on retailers and peers due to limited formal channels
	Oral Culture Over Digital Tools	Lack of digital access leads to oral transmission of product information
Evaluation of Alternatives	Affordability > Variety	Cost is prioritized over brand or features due to budget limitations
	Limited Options Available	Many rural markets lack product variety, reducing evaluation

Purchase Decision	Group/Family Decision Making	Decisions are often taken collectively, particularly by elders or men
	Habitual or Loyalty-Based Buying	Purchase is often repetitive and influenced by habit or seller relationship.
Post-Purchase Behavior	Lack of Formal Feedback or Complaint Mechanism	Satisfaction is shown by repeat purchase; dissatisfaction is rarely reported
	Informal Satisfaction Expression	Feedback, if any, is given orally to local vendors, not through formal channels.

### Discussion and Conclusion

This systematic review assessed the applicability of the five-stage consumer buying decision model in rural India. Findings reveal that while the model offers a useful structure, its application in rural contexts is fragmented and often diverges due to socio-cultural and infrastructural constraints. The stages of need recognition and purchase decision are the most evident in rural buying decisions, often influenced by external factors such as seasonal, social, or ritual events. However, information search and evaluation of alternatives are significantly underdeveloped. Most consumers rely on word-of-mouth, trusted retailers, and community networks due to limited digital access and low awareness of available choices. Moreover, decisions are frequently collective, shaped by family or community influence, rather than individual evaluation. Post-purchase behavior, including feedback or formal complaint mechanisms, is nearly absent, with repeated buying serving as a proxy for satisfaction.

Thematic analysis further underscores that rural consumer behavior is nonlinear, trust-based, and socially embedded, challenging the rational, individualistic assumptions of the original five-stage model. Although digital tools are gradually influencing younger consumers, these shifts remain uneven. The study concludes that while the five-stage model holds partial relevance, it requires contextual adaptation. Marketers and policymakers must design culturally sensitive and locally grounded strategies that reflect the realities of rural consumer life in India.

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