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CONSUMER PERCEPTION TOWARDS THE ROLE OF 'SUPPLYCO' IN STABILIZING PRICES OF ESSENTIAL COMMODITIES WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THRISSUR DISTRICT

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ABSTRACT

Government intervention in the food grain market is a commonly employed strategy aimed at ensuring price stability for essential commodities. Supplyco is one of the biggest retail networks that the Kerala government controls to intervene in the market and control the cost of necessities. As a result of Supplyco's intervention in the market, private companies in the food grain market are compelled to offer their products at reasonable prices. Supplyco plays a crucial role in maintaining price stability for basic goods like rice, pulses, spices, sugar, etc. This study explores consumer perceptions towards the role of Supplyco in stabilizing the prices of essential commodities and the extent of customer satisfaction with certain products offered by Supplyco. Also, it aims to identify the differences in the level of consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco and the open market. The findings of the study indicate that consumers are backing most of Supplyco's initiatives aimed at stabilizing the prices of essential goods, and the availability of quality products at subsidized prices is a significant factor influencing consumers to choose Supplyco over open-market stores.

Keywords: Supplyco, Price Stabilization, Essential Commodities

1. INTRODUCTION

A key objective of food policy is to stabilize the price of food grains. For farmers and customers as well, particularly the underprivileged, food grain prices are vital. The Public Distribution System (PDS) was developed as a way to distribute food grains at reasonable costs in order to control scarcity. Currently, the Public Distribution System (PDS) is arguably the largest food distribution network in the world. It has grown to be a crucial component of the poverty reduction strategy over time. It has also been shown to be an effective method of transferring income to people in lower income brackets. The PDS is primarily a social welfare and anti-poverty initiative of the Indian government. Under the PDS, basic goods like rice, sugar, wheat, pulses, spices, and so forth are provided to the public at a lower price. It has proven to be one of the most crucial tools available to the government for controlling the nation's food demand. Since the majority of Indians live in rural areas with low living standards and are unable to pay the market prices for necessities, it is impossible to ignore the PDS in India.

Supplyco is a government organization that actively engages in the purchase, sale, and distribution of necessities. Their main goal is to keep prices stable and make necessities affordable for all societal groups, particularly the underprivileged. Supplyco obtains commodities, in part, by purchasing directly from farmers and other suppliers. They avoid middlemen and guarantee fair prices for both producers and customers by directly obtaining the necessary supplies. This helps maintain a stable supply of necessities while mitigating price variations brought on by market forces.

Supplyco operates a state-wide network of fair-priced shops. These shops act as distribution hubs for necessities, and products are offered at subsidized prices, which enables low-income households to afford them. By ensuring that the items reach every part of Kerala, this distribution network lowers transportation costs and raises the affordability of the products. Their primary responsibilities include selling fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) at lower prices, organizing special fairs to stop the unjust price increases for rice during festival seasons, selling medicines by opening medical stores, acquiring paddy, processing, and distributing wheat and its byproducts, serving as a dealer for petroleum products like kerosene, gasoline, diesel, and LPG, and serving as a nodal agency to carry out the state's Government of India programs.

A popular retail chain operated by Supplyco in Kerala is Maveli Stores. Maveli Stores are widely known for providing a large selection of goods at reasonable costs, such as groceries, household necessities, and personal care products. They have developed into a popular location for many customers who are seeking quality goods at affordable prices. The establishments are aesthetically pleasing and offer consumers a satisfying shopping experience. By means of Maveli retail stores, the Kerala State Civil Supplies Corporation (Supplyco) has guaranteed equitable pricing, quality items, and protection against unscrupulous business practices.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shruti Dholi (2021) in her study, examined how consumers behaved when purchasing FMCGS based on aspects like performance, quality, pricing, promotions, and personalized services, taking into account their gender, age, and income. Neetu Abey George and Fiona H. McKay's (2019) conducted a study to evaluate the PDS's effectiveness in achieving food and nutritional security in India. The study's findings emphasize the value of PDS in the fight against hunger and malnutrition, but they also note that it has a minimal impact on improving food security or reducing the death rate among children due to operational inefficiencies. Muhammed Basheer M.P. (2019) conducted a study to compare the impact of the interference between the two major retail networks, i.e., Supplyco and Consumerfed that are governed by two ministries under the Government of Kerala. He identified that customers are worried about a number of things, including product quality, constant availability in the store, availability of multiple brands, product packaging and cleanliness, outlet proximity, personalized customer service, in-store promotions, store atmosphere, and ease of shopping. Deepthi Mary Mathew and Nimmish

Sany (2018) conducted a study to determine whether Supplyco had succeeded in achieving its strategic goal of limiting the price increases of necessary goods. The analysis discovered that only a limited number of goods are offered through its retail network, which is insufficient to stop the prices of necessities from rising. Mary T. L. (2017) attempted to investigate the function of Maveli outlets in retailing by examining customer satisfaction with Maveli store operations. She has come to the conclusion that the Maveli outlet fulfilled the basic needs of the depressed members of society in terms of purchases.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To study the consumer perception towards the role of Supplyco in stabilizing prices of essential commodities.
- To assess the extent of consumer satisfaction with certain products offered by Supplyco.
- To identify the difference in the level of consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco and the open market.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted using the convenience sampling method, and the primary data were collected with the help of a structured questionnaire.

4.1 SOURCES OF DATA

Both primary and secondary sources are used for the study.

A. Primary Data:

In this study, the primary data are collected directly from the respondents with the help of a structured questionnaire.

B. Secondary Data:

Secondary data is collected from different sources, like journals, magazines, published books, various websites, etc.

4.2 SAMPLE SIZE

On the basis of convenient sampling, 120 respondents were selected from Thrissur district as the sample size for the study.

4.3 STATISTICAL TOOLS

The data collected with the help of the questionnaire is analysed using statistical tools such as percentage analysis, mean and standard deviation, weighted average mean, and one sample t-test.

5. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Table 1. Demographic Profile

Gender:	No of respondents	Percentage
Male	28	23.33
Female	92	76.67
Grand Total	120	100
Age: Below 30	74	61.67
31 - 40	17	14.17
41 - 50	18	15

Above 50	11	9.16
Grand Total	120	100
Marital Status: Married	60	50
Unmarried	60	50
Grand Total	120	100
Educational Qualification: SSLC or below SSLC	21	17.5
Plus Two	17	14.17
Graduate	50	41.67
Post Graduate	27	22.5
Others	5	4.16
Grand Total	120	100
Occupation: Govt./semi govt.	9	7.5
Private	30	25
Business	3	2.5
Labourer	10	8.33
Housewife	24	20
Others	44	36.67
Grand Total	120	100
Annual Income: Less than 10,000	64	53.33
10,001 - 15,000	26	21.67
15,001 - 20,000	14	11.67
20,001 - 25000	9	7.5
Above 25,000	7	5.83
Grand Total	120	100

Source: Primary data

Out of the 120 respondents who are taken into consideration for the study, 92 are female (76.67%), and 28 are male (23.33%). When it comes to the age of respondents, the analysis reveals that 61.67% of the respondents are under the age of below 30. 15% are under the age of 41 to 50, 14.17% are under the age of 31 to 40, and 9.16% are over the age of 50. When the marital status of the respondents is analyzed, 50% of them are married, and the remaining 50% are unmarried. In terms of the educational qualifications of the respondents, 41.67% are graduates, 22.5% are postgraduates, 17.5% come under the category of SSLC or below SSLC, 14.17% are plus two, and the remaining 4.16% have other educational qualifications. While analyzing the occupations of the respondents, it is discovered that the majority of them fall under others category (36.67%) that is made up of students and the persons who are working outside of the given categories of employment. Besides, 25% are working in the private sector, 20% are housewives, 8.33% are labourers and 7.5% are government or semi-government jobs,

and the remaining 2.5% operate their own businesses. While considering the monthly income of the respondents, most of them have less than Rs.10,000 in a month (53.33%). At the same time, 21.67% come under the income level of Rs.10,001 to Rs.15,000, and 11.67% have an income between Rs.15,001 and Rs.20,000. Besides, 7.5% have a monthly income between Rs.20,001 and Rs.25,000, and the remaining 5.83% have more than Rs. 25,000 as their monthly income.

Table 2. Information sources about Supplyco and the product availability

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total (Σfw)	Σf	Mean	Rank
weightage	5	4	3	2	1				
Information sources									
Family, relatives and neighbours	68	26	14	6	6	504	120	4.20	1
Newspaper	36	24	23	22	15	404	120	3.37	3
Personal inquiry	29	30	37	14	10	414	120	3.45	2
Television	22	16	23	42	17	344	120	2.87	4
Internet	27	11	22	26	34	331	120	2.76	5

Source: primary data

For analyzing the responses given by the respondents, weights are assigned to these ranks, with 5 being assigned to rank 1, 4 for rank 2, and so forth, to create a score. The analysis is then based on the determination of the weighted mean. Then the information source with the highest mean score is ranked 1, and so on. According to the findings, 'family, relatives, and neighbors' are the most favored sources of information regarding Supplyco and the products available there. Personal inquiries are ranked 2; newspapers came in at the third rank; television came in at the fourth position; and lastly, the internet has the lowest mean.

Table 3: Opinion about the sufficiency of the allotted quota of essential commodities

Opinion	No of respondents	Percentage
No	69	57.5
Yes	51	42.5
Grand Total	120	100

Source: Primary data

According to the analysis, the majority of the respondents (57.5%) said that the allotted quota of essential commodities for their family is not sufficient. However, 42.5% of the respondents say that the allotted quota for their family is sufficient.

Table 4: Options for the purchase of extra requirements

Options	No of respondents	Percentage
Open market stores	74	61.67
Supplyco	19	15.83
Co-operative societies	10	8.33

Others	17	14.17
Grand Total	120	100

Source: Primary data

The analysis shows that the majority of the respondents (61.67%) purchase their extra requirements from the open market stores; 15.83% choose Supplyco; and 14.17% choose other stores like margin-free markets to buy their extra requirements. While 8.33% opt for co-operative societies to meet their needs.

Table 5: Customer opinion about the functioning of Supplyco

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total (Σfw)	Σf	Mean	Rank
Weightage	5	4	3	2	1				
Opinion									
Manage and regulate the open market pricing of basic necessities	30	56	25	6	3	464	120	3.87	2
Ensure that the needy and poor always have access to essential commodities at a fair price	69	28	14	3	6	511	120	4.26	1
Act as a government agent in the public distribution system to guarantee food security	33	33	37	12	5	437	120	3.64	3
Prevent dishonest traders from hoarding stock and engaging in black marketing	22	38	28	16	16	394	120	3.28	5
Serve as a retail location that is convenient for customers	32	32	22	21	13	409	120	3.41	4

Source: Primary data

To find out how the respondents perceived Supplyco's operation, they are asked to rank their selection on a scale of 1 to 5 according to their importance by giving rank 1 to high and rank 5 to low. For analyzing the responses given by the respondents, weights are assigned to these ranks, with 5 being assigned to rank 1, 4 for rank 2, and so forth, to create a score. The analysis is then based on the determination of the weighted mean. Then the customer opinion about the functioning of Supplyco with the highest mean score is ranked 1, and so on. Based on the analysis regarding the customer opinion about the functioning of Supplyco, most of the respondents opinioned that Supplyco is mainly functioning to 'ensure that the needy and poor always have access to essential commodities at a fair price'. The functions of 'manage and regulate the open market pricing of basic necessities' were ranked second; 'act as a government agent in the public distribution system to guarantee food security' came in at the third rank; the function of 'Serve as a retail location that is convenient for customers' came in at the fourth position; and lastly, the function of 'Prevent dishonest traders from hoarding stock and engaging in black marketing' came in at the fifth position and has the lowest mean.

Table 6: Consumer perception towards the role of Supplyco in stabilizing prices of essential commodities

Opinion	Mean	Standard Deviation
Selling necessities for life at subsidized rates all year round in order to maintain price stability	3.99	0.95
Intervention to stop the speculative powers from hoarding food grains in an attempt to manipulate commodity prices	3.66	0.82
Extra actions taken to regulate the prices of necessities by holding fairs during festival season	3.78	0.97
Selling packaged products, etc., at a discount to the open market price in a retail setting	3.41	1.06
Participation in the purchase of goods during times of surplus and their distribution during times of scarcity with the aim of stabilizing commodity prices	3.35	1.04

Source: Primary data

The analysis is conducted by using the mean and standard deviation. The analysis revealed that the measure with the highest mean (3.99) is 'selling necessities for life at subsidized rates all year round in order to maintain price stability'. The measures 'extra actions taken to regulate the prices of necessities by holding fairs during festival season' and 'intervention to stop the speculative powers from hoarding food grains in an attempt to manipulate commodity prices' have mean scores of 3.78 and 3.66, respectively. With a mean score of more than 3.5, these three Supplyco price stabilization strategies are rated as 4, indicating that customers support them. Whereas, the measure of 'selling packaged products, etc. at a discount to the open market price in a retail setting' has a mean of 3.41, and the measure of 'participation in the purchase of goods during times of surplus and their distribution during times of scarcity with the aim of stabilizing commodity prices' has the lowest mean (3.35). The consumer perception of these two measures is neutral, as indicated by their mean score of 3. As expressed, the consumer's perception of the latter two indicators is relatively lower than that of the first three measures.

Table 7. Products most frequently bought by customers from Supplyco

	R1	R2	R3	R4	R5	Total (Σfw)	Σf	Mean	Rank
Weightage	5	4	3	2	1				
Products									
Rice	83	12	9	8	8	514	120	4.28	1
Edible oil	39	42	21	8	10	452	120	3.77	3
Pulses, spices and condiments	73	19	14	5	9	502	120	4.18	2
Toiletries, personal care & cleaning items	32	27	35	12	14	411	120	3.43	4
Biscuit, bakery and baby food	15	20	35	24	26	334	120	2.78	5

Source: Primary data

For analyzing the responses given by the respondents, weights are assigned to the ranks, with 5 being assigned to rank 1, 4 for rank 2, and so forth, to create a score. The analysis is then based on the determination of the weighted mean. Then the product with the highest mean is ranked 1, and so on. The analysis revealed that the most frequently purchased product from Supplyco is 'rice', which has the highest mean score (4.28), and therefore is ranked as 1. 'Pulses, spices, and condiments' has a mean score of 4.18 and is ranked second. 'Edible oil' came in at the third rank as its mean score is 3.77, and 'toiletries, personal care, and cleaning items' are ranked in the fourth position as their mean is 3.43. Lastly, products such as 'biscuits, bakeries, and baby food items' are ranked as 5, as their mean score is low, which indicates that these products are not frequently purchased by the respondents.

Table 8: Satisfaction level of customers

Products	Mean	Standard deviation
Rice	4.3	1.08
Edible oil	3.77	0.99
Pulses, spices and condiments	3.95	1.07
Toiletries, personal care & cleaning items	3.42	1.04
Biscuit, bakery & baby food	3.25	1.15

Source: Primary data

The analysis is conducted by using the mean and standard deviation. Based on the analysis, rice has the highest mean score (4.3), indicating that customers are highly satisfied with the rice offered by Supplyco. Also, commodities such as 'pulses, spices, and condiments' and 'edible oil' have mean scores of 3.95 and 3.77, respectively. With a mean score of more than 3.5, these two products are rated as 4, indicating that customers are highly satisfied with these two groups of products too. While commodities such as 'toiletries, personal care, and cleaning items' have a mean of 3.42 and 'biscuit, bakery, and baby food' have the lowest mean (3.25), consumer satisfaction with these two commodities is average, as indicated by their mean score of 3. As expressed, customers are highly satisfied with rice, edible oil, pulses, spices, and condiments, whereas customers have an average level of satisfaction with products such as toiletries, personal care items, cleaning items, biscuits, bakery items, and baby food items, as their mean scores are comparatively low with the first three groups of products.

Level of consumer perceptions towards the attributes of Supplyco and the open market

H0: The mean score is equal to 3

H1: The mean score is not equal to 3

Table 9: Consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco

Attributes	Number of samples	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Price of the product	120	4.14	1.071	0.098	11.673	<0.001
Customer personal care	120	3.58	1.034	0.094	6.089	<0.001
Quality of the product	120	3.77	0.950	0.087	8.838	<0.001

Packing & cleanliness of packets	120	3.42	1.034	0.094	4.415	<0.001
Store ambience and convenience in shopping	120	3.28	1.115	0.102	2.702	0.008
Parking facility	120	3.04	1.318	0.120	0.346	0.730
Availability of all products in all-time in the store	120	2.58	1.320	0.120	-3.527	<0.001
Consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco	120	3.3988	0.799	0.0729	5.467	<0.001

Source: Primary data

To analyze the level of consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco, one sample t-test is used. The average of the five-point Likert scale, which is 3, is taken as the test value. According to the analysis, the price of the commodity is one of the main attributes that makes consumers more likely to opt for Supplyco to purchase their goods, as it has the highest mean score (4.14). Consumers are also agreeing with attributes such as customer personal care and quality of the products available through the outlets of Supplyco, which have a mean of 3.58 and 3.77, respectively. Also, attributes such as packing and cleanliness of packets, store ambience, and convenience in shopping and parking facilities have a neutral level of perception. But as compared to the other attributes of Supplyco, the attribute of availability of all products at all times in the store has a low level of perception, as it has a mean score of 2.58, indicating that all goods are not available in the store at all times when the customers are going to buy for their needs.

When it comes to the overall consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco, the analysis reveals that the mean value of the consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco is 3.3988, which indicates that the mean score is not equal to the test value of 3. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Therefore, the alternative hypothesis that the mean score is not equal to the average is accepted, which indicates that the consumer perception level towards the attributes of Supplyco is higher than the average level.

Table 10. Consumer perception towards the attributes of open market

Attributes	Number of samples	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard error	t-value	p-value
Price of the product	120	3.29	1.368	0.125	2.335	0.021
Customer personal care	120	3.58	1.034	0.094	6.089	<0.001
Quality of the product	120	3.88	0.997	0.091	9.702	<0.001

Packing & cleanliness of packets	120	3.61	1.056	0.096	6.313	<0.001
Store ambience and convenience in shopping	120	3.68	0.963	0.088	7.679	<0.001
Parking facility	120	3.66	1.280	0.117	5.634	<0.001
Availability of all products in all-time in the store	120	4.04	1.212	0.111	9.415	<0.001
Consumer perception towards the attributes of open market	120	3.6762	0.783	0.0715	9.451	<0.001

Source: Primary data

To analyze the level of consumer perception towards the above-mentioned attributes of open market outlets, one sample t-test is used. The average of the five-point Likert scale, which is 3, is taken as the test value. Then the analysis shows that the attribute of availability of all products at all times in the store has the highest mean value (4.04), which indicates that consumers are preferring the open market outlets because they provide all kinds of products that they need when they are going to make purchases. Also, attributes such as quality of the product, store ambience and convenience in shopping, parking facilities, customer personal care, packing, and cleanliness of packets have a mean value greater than 3.5, which is considered as 4, indicating that consumers agree with all of these attributes of the open market outlets. Besides, the attribute of price of the commodity of the open market outlets is least preferred by the customers as compared to the other attributes of the open market, and it shows that consumers have a neutral level of perception towards the price of the commodity.

When it comes to the overall consumer perception towards the attributes of the open market, the analysis revealed that the mean value is 3.6762, which indicates that the mean score is not equal to 3, which is the test value, and hence the null hypothesis is rejected. As a result, the consumer perception level towards the attributes of open market outlets is higher than the average level, as its mean score is more than 3.5, which is considered as 4, indicating that consumers are more agreeable with the attributes of the open market.

When compared to the mean value of overall consumer perception towards the attributes of the open market (3.6762), the overall consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco has a lower mean value (3.3988), which shows that consumers are more agreeing with the attributes of the open market than with Supplyco. A higher degree of perception is indicated by the greatest mean value rather than the lowest mean value.

Consequently, it is identified that consumers are more agreeable with the price of the products and have disagreed with the all-time availability of all products in the store when it comes to Supplyco. But consumers have an opposite opinion about these two attributes when it comes to open market outlets. However, all other attributes as provided have a neutral level of perception in both Supplyco and the open market.

In short, there is a notable but slight difference between the level of consumer perceptions towards the attributes, as given above, of Supplyco and the open market outlets.

6. FINDINGS

- Out of the 120 respondents who are taken into consideration for the study, the majority are females (76.67%).
- 61.67% of the respondents are under the age category of below 30.
- When it comes to the marital status of the respondents, 50% of them are married, and the remaining 50% are unmarried.
- In terms of the educational qualifications, the majority of them are graduates (41.67%).
- Regarding the occupation of the respondents, most of them fall under others category (36.67%) that is made up of students and the persons who are working outside of the given categories of employment.
- 53.33% of the respondents have less than Rs. 10,000 in a month as their income.
- Family, relatives, and neighbors are the most favored sources of information regarding Supplyco and the products available there.
- 57.5% of the respondents said that the allotted quota of essential commodities for their family is not sufficient.
- 61.67% of the respondents purchase their extra requirements from the open market stores.
- Regarding the customer opinion about the functioning of Supplyco, most of the respondents opined that Supplyco is mainly functioning to 'ensure that the needy and poor always have access to essential commodities at a fair price'.
- The Supplyco's price stabilization strategies such as 'selling necessities for life at subsidized rates all year round in order to maintain price stability', 'intervention to stop the speculative powers from hoarding food grains in an attempt to manipulate commodity prices', and 'extra actions taken to regulate the prices of necessities by holding fairs during festival season' are the strategies customers agreeing with or more supporting.
- Rice, pulses, spices and condiments and edible oil are products that are most frequently purchased by the respondents.
- 87.5% of the respondents said that they are also buying their necessities from open market over Supplyco.
- As per the one sample t-test, the null hypothesis is rejected as the consumer perception level towards the attributes of Supplyco is higher than the average level, as its mean score is not equal to 3.
- When it comes to Supplyco, it is identified that consumers are more agreeable with the price of the products and have disagreed with the all-time availability of all products in the store.
- The level of consumer perception towards the attributes of the open market, one sample t-test showed its mean score is not equal to 3, hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. As a result, consumers are more agreeable with the attributes of the open market than Supplyco.
- In short, there is a notable but slight difference between the level of consumer perception towards the attributes of Supplyco and the open market outlets.

7. SUGGESTIONS

The following suggestions are pointed out by the respondents while filling out the questionnaire:

- Ensure a minimum stock level is maintained at all times to lessen the chances of running out of goods.
- Expand the list of subsidized goods by adding more products.
- Improve customer access by offering online ordering functionality and delivery services.
- Raise the limit on the amount of subsidized goods that can be purchased.

8. CONCLUSION

In today's fast-paced world, consumers are highly concerned about the stability of prices for essential goods. The launch of Supplyco in 1974, one of the biggest retail networks run by the Kerala government, has proven to be a huge success in providing the state's impoverished population with necessities at a price lower than the open market. It also takes on multiple roles to ensure that the prices of these necessities remain stable. The study's findings indicate that consumers are backing most of Supplyco's initiatives aimed at stabilizing the prices of essential goods. The availability of quality products at subsidized prices is a significant factor influencing consumers to choose Supplyco over open-market stores. Also, consumers are highly satisfied with the products like rice, edible oil, pulses, spices, and condiments offered through Supplyco. As a result of Supplyco's intervention in the market, private companies in the food grain market are compelled to offer their products at reasonable prices. These initiatives safeguard the financial stability of families to a great extent, especially the vulnerable sections of society.

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