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**A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ON THE CONSUMER BUYING BEHAVIOR  
(WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON THE CUSTOMERS OF DIBRUGARH TOWN)**

**UJJAL BHUYAN  
JUNIOR RESEARCH FELLOW  
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE  
DIBRUGARH UNIVERSITY  
DIBRUGARH**

**ABSTRACT**

Information technology has brought about a sea change in the way customers behave in the market place. Almost everybody is living two lives today, a vibrant online life and a somewhat boring offline life. Today we are all connected in one platform or another and customer’s expectations have changed over the years. There are no set times for making a purchase as we had in the past. Information technology is not just about spreading static information; it is about communicating. Customers now have 24/7 access to companies and their services. Customer-to-customer and customer –to –company dialogue have grown over the years and customers are becoming less tolerant and loyal. So societal trends driven by the Information technology revolution are changing customer behavior and demand and will continue to do so. To keep up with –and benefit from- the Information technology revolution, organizations need to understand its impact on customer behavior. In a world where physical and virtual environments are rapidly converging, companies need to meet customer needs anytime and anywhere. In this paper an attempt has been made to the study the driving factors behind customers’ preference for information technology in their purchase and also to throw light on the trends in customer buying behavior in this era of information technology. The information and data required for the study are collected through a well-structured questionnaire from 60 respondents selected on random basis. The outcome of the study would show the shift in the power from the hands of the marketers to the consumers. The statement “customer is king” has never been experienced by companies like in the Information technology era.

**KEYWORDS**

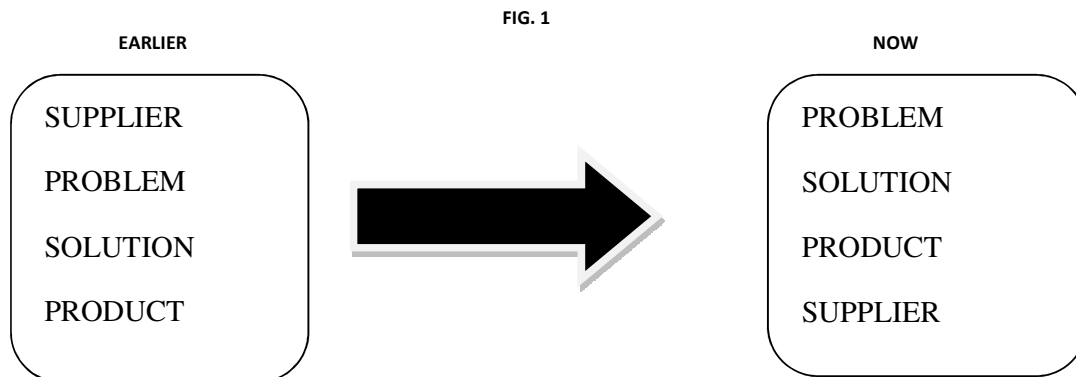
sea change, tolerant, static, virtual environment.

**INTRODUCTION**

Information technology is quickly altering the way people go about in buying goods and services. The first major impact of information technology, as we think of it today, was the facilitation of commercial transactions electronically, usually using technology like Electronic Data Interchange (EDI) Introduced in the late 1970s) to send commercial documents like purchase orders or invoices electronically. Later, with the development of the internet, the effect of information technology on consumer behavior could be seen in the purchase of goods and services over the World Wide Web via secure servers with e-shopping carts and with electronic pay services, like credit card payment authorizations. In the business-to consumer segment, sales through the web have been increasing radically over the last few years. Customers, not only from developed countries but also from developing countries are adopting new shopping channel. IT has significant roles to play not only in businesses but also in daily activities of individuals. In the era of IT, consumer behavior is the way of interacting with an online market, communicating with the business and approaching towards decisions, which are influenced by the presentation of the marketers. In the words of Dennis et al. (2004) and Harris & Dennis (2008) the study of e-consumer behavior is getting importance because of abundance of online shopping. The convenience and lesser costs of making transactions using information technology have given rise in customers bargaining power and intense global competition. Just think back ten years ago or even 5 years, how were businesses reaching their customers? How were customers reaching them?, Compare that to how communication is passing between the two parties now and who is driving it. Technology has placed the power in the customers’ hands literally with the internet enabled smart phone and tablets. Days are gone when we had a definite shopping time and as soon as the marketer shuts the shutter of his or her shop we had to wait for the next day to get the product or place an order. Today with the emergence of information technology. Customers now have 24/7 access to companies and their services. Customer-to-customer and customer –to –company dialogue have grown over the years and customers are becoming less tolerant and loyal. So societal trends driven by the Information technology revolution are changing customer behavior and demand and will continue to do so. To keep up with –and benefit from- the Information technology revolution, organizations need to understand its impact on customer behavior.

**TRANSITION IN THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR IN THE ERA OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY**

Information technology has led to a transition in the behaviour exhibited in the market place by the consumers.



Earlier the consumer first goes to the retailer (supplier) because of his/her lucrative advertisements, then he/she explains the problem to the sales guy and the sales person comes up with 2/3 brands that suits his/her requirements and finally the consumer makes the choice out of those brands. So what is going on is that the consumer has to trust the salesperson in their purpose and have to experience the product personally before forming an opinion about the product. But due to emergence of information technology, the earlier sequence has seen a transition. Now the consumer starts with his/ her problem by say googling the problem, then he or she reads the review, descriptions and social information provided by experts and consumers like them. On the basis of the information gathered the consumer chooses the brand that best befits their needs and feelings and finally he/she decide from where to buy it based on a mix of price, convenience and services.

**INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY AND THE CONSUMER**

Information technology has fundamentally changed consumers’ buying behaviour and purchasing decisions especially in the following three ways:

- **CONNECTIVITY:** We are all connected in one platform or another through our network of friends. We also own more than one device that keeps us updated. This means that we thrive on being active and informed online. Information technology advancements fuel the connectivity that brings together the world as one big community, from the smart phones to super-fast data. This trend is not about to change because now kids as young as 5 years know how to operate a smart phone, LinkedIn even lowered its age limit to 13years to capitalize on the technology adoption rate.
- **NEW COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:** In the past, a company provided customer service through face –to- face customer services and phone calls which had limited the customer-to-company dialogue. Then came the phase of emails as a medium of providing customer services. These communication tools had their own challenges and favored the company more; it was at sellers’ discretion what information to give out. This age however, is very refreshed. Social media platforms and live chat place the seller right in front of their customer; the seller cannot sacrifice their customer to maintain your brand position. Actually, when they do not respond to a query, they actually damage their brand reputation because that information is accessible to millions of people. So the customer-to company dialogue has grown in the present era.
- **EXPECTATIONS:** In the past, as a company you set the times that you were open for business, and customers had to put up with it or stay without that particular product. Technology has totally changed that, with the introduction of e-commerce and mobile phones, customers can access products at any time. They have raised expectations on what is acceptable customer service and what is not. Also, consumers today enjoy more personalized marketing communications in contrast to mass communications in the era of IT. As a business, you have to keep up with the changed consumer behavior or be out of business.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Bhatnagar & Ghose (2004) found that time spent by consumers in surfing on the net was 9.17 minutes on automotive sites, 9.26 minutes on telecom/ Internet sites, 10.44 minutes on travel sites and 25.08 minutes on financial sites times. The more time spent by consumers in searching for information via Internet and more frequently they do so, more the information gathered online influences the purchase decision. Bhatnagar & Ghose (2004) exclaimed that gender, education, age and Internet experience influence the time consumers spend in searching for information, while search patterns may be different in retail services because of product classification. In the light of the consumers’ age Wood (2002) observed that as compared to older consumers, younger adults, especially those under age 25, are more attracted in adopting new technologies, like the Internet, to find out about new products, search for product information, and compare and assessing alternatives. Reason behind this is that older consumers may perceive the benefits of Internet shopping to be less than the cost of investing in the skill needed to do it effectively, and therefore avoid shopping on the Internet. By taking gender into consideration Burke (2002) revealed that men express more interest in using different types of technology in the shopping process. They are more optimistic about using the Internet as a shopping medium. According to Burke (2002) and Li et al. (1999) education level also influences e- shopping i.e. higher educated consumers are more comfortable using non-store channels, like the Internet for shopping mainly because of the fact that education is often positively correlated with an individual’s level of Internet literacy.

**OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

To study the trends in consumer buying behavior in the era of information technology with respect to demographic variables.

**METHODOLOGY**

In the present study, a sample of 50 respondents from Dibrugarh town has been taken into consideration using purposive sampling method. The sample consists of both male and female, respondents of different age group and educational qualifications are taken. The data has been collected through a well-structured questionnaire. Respondents were asked to pen down their responses on various items in the questionnaire. Cross tabulations between different variables are used.

**SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The study is limited only to Dibrugarh town. It is worthy to mention that an attempt has been made to study the trends in consumer buying behavior in the era of information technology with respect to the demographic factors. In the study, three dimensions of trends in consumer buying behavior: connectivity among consumers, change in expectations of customers with respect to marketing communication and shopping time and lastly, new communication channels are considered. In case of demographic factors, only three factors are considered: gender, age and educational qualification.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The study would throw light on how information technology is playing a crucial role in the consumer buying behavior. It would also highlight the trends in the consumer buying behavior with respect to connectivity, expectation and communication dimensions. Combining these dimensions with the demographic variables would show if there is any relationship between the two.

**MAJOR FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

- **CONNECTIVITY OF CONSUMERS:** IT has played a crucial role in connecting the consumers in the market place. This enables the consumers in sharing information about products and thereby contributing to reduce information asymmetry that prevails in the market place. Demographic factor wise responses of sample respondents regarding the role of IT in enhancing connectivity and medium of connectivity preferred or availed are shown below:

**GENDER**

Out of the 50 respondents taken as a sample (of which 25 are male and 25 female respondents), responses with respect to connectivity of consumers in the era of information technology are recorded. The following table 1 highlights the responses:

**TABLE 1: RESPONSES TO CONSUMER CONNECTIVITY (Gender Wise)**

GENDER	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEUTRAL	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE	TOTAL
MALE	17	2	2	4	0	25
FEMALE	6	12	1	3	3	25

Source: Survey Data

Out of the 25 male respondents, 76% voted for consumer connectivity in the era of IT while 72% of the female respondents voted for the same. Also, there are 6(24%) female respondents who responded against the role of IT in enhancing connectivity as compared to the male respondents so there is a difference in the gender wise response to the role of IT in enhancing connectivity.

**TABLE 2: MEDIUM OF CONNECTIVITY**

Gender	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	Social media
Male	24%	24%	64%	80%
female	36%	36%	44%	72%

Source: Survey Data

It is clearly highlighted that male respondents are more into social media (80%) and emails (64%) as a medium of connectivity than female respondents.

**AGE**

Out of the 50 respondents taken as a sample (of which 6 belong to the age group 11-20, 17 belong to 21-30 group, 17 belong to 31-40 group, 6 belong to 41-50 group and 4 belong to 51 and above age group), responses with respect to connectivity of consumers in the era of information technology are recorded. The following table 3 highlights the responses:

**TABLE 3: RESPONSES TO CONSUMER CONNECTIVITY (Age Wise)**

Age groups	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
11-20	5	1	0	0	0	6
21-30	12	4	1	0	0	17
31-40	5	7	0	2	3	17
41-50	1	1	1	3	0	6
50 and above	0	1	1	2	0	4

Source: Survey Data

Out of the 50 respondents belonging to different age groups, 100% in the age group 11-20 voted for consumer connectivity in the era of IT, while 94% in the group 21-30, 71% in the group 31-40, 33% in the group 41-50 and 25% in the group voted for the same. So there is a difference in age wise response to the role of IT in enhancing connectivity. The reason for difference can be traced to the medium of connectivity they prefer or avail of. The following table 4 highlights the same.

**TABLE 4: MEDIUM OF CONNECTIVITY PREFERRED AGE WISE**

AGE GROUP	PERSONAL CONTACT	PHONE CALLS	EMAILS	SOCIAL MEDIA
11-20	0%	0%	17%	100%
21-30	23%	18%	65%	94%
31-40	35%	29%	59%	76%
41-50	34%	50%	23%	33%
51-ABOVE	100%	100%	0%	25%

Source: Survey Data

It is clear that the age groups 11-20, 21-30 and 31-40 are more into social media and emails as a medium of connectivity than the age groups 41-50 and 51-above who preferred personal contact and phones calls as connectivity medium than emails and social media.

**EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**

Out of the 50 respondents, 2 respondents are in secondary schools, 4 in higher secondary schooling, 9 are undergraduates, 22 are having a graduate degree and 13 with post graduate degrees. Their responses with respect to connectivity of consumers are recorded. The following table 5 highlights the responses:

**TABLE 5: RESPONSES ON CONNECTIVITY (Educational Qualification Wise)**

education	Strongly aware	Aware	neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	total
Secondary	2	0	0	0	0	2
Higher secondary	3	1	0	0	0	4
Undergraduate	0	3	2	3	1	9
Graduate	9	6	1	4	2	22
Post graduate	9	4	0	0	0	13

Source: Survey Data

The respondents in the secondary and higher secondary category have strongly voted for consumer connectivity in the era of IT. 33% respondents in the undergraduate category, 68% in the graduate and 100% in the post graduate category voted for the same. So there is a difference in the educational qualification wise response to the role of IT in enhancing connectivity. The reason for difference can be traced to the medium of connectivity they prefer or avail of. The following table 6 highlights the same.

**TABLE 6: MEDIUM OF CONNECTIVITY PREFERRED**

qualification	personal contact	phone calls	emails	social media
secondary	0%	0%	0%	100%
Higher secondary	0%	0%	25%	100%
Undergraduate	77%	89%	33%	22%
Graduate	27%	32%	59%	77%
Post graduate	15%	0%	77%	100%

Source: Survey Data

**NEW COMMINATION CHANNELS**

Gender: The gender wise responses regarding the growth of customer-to-company dialogue in the era of IT are tabulated below:

**TABLE 7: GENDER WISE RESPONSE TO THE GROWTH OF CUSTOMER-TO-COMPANY DIALOGUE**

Gender	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Male	8	12	3	2	25
female	8	8	0	9	25

Source: Survey Data

From the above table we can figure out that 80% of the male respondents voted for the growth of customer-to-company dialogue in the current era with only 8% who voted against it. While, 64% of the female respondents voted for the same and 36% stood against it.

**TABLE 8: CUSTOMER SERVICE CHANNEL PREFERRED OR AVAILED**

Gender	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	Social media	Live chats
Male	40%	36%	36%	48%	56%
Female	52%	56%	28%	44%	32%

Source: Survey Data

**TABLE 9: FEEDBACK MEDIUM**

Gender	Personal contact	phone calls	emails	Social media
Male	8%	16%	40%	48%
Female	28%	20%	36%	44%

Source: Survey Data

The above tables clearly highlight that the responses toward growth of customer-to-company dialogue in the era of IT are shaped by the customer service channel and feedback medium used to communicate. The male respondents prefer social media and live chat as service channel more than their female counterparts. Also, feedback medium used by male caters more to social media than the female respondents.

**AGE**

The age wise responses regarding the growth of customer-to-company in the present era are tabulated below:

**TABLE 10**

Age	Strongly agreed	Agreed	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	total
11-20	3	3	0	0	0	6
21-30	6	8	1	2	0	17
31-40	5	6	1	5	0	17
41-50	2	0	0	2	2	6
51-above	0	0	1	3	0	4

Source: Survey Data

From the above table 10, we can figure out that the respondents in the age group 11-20 and 21-30 are in strong agreement that IT has led to growth of customer-to-company dialogue. Whereas, 65% in the age group 31-40, 33% in the age group 41-50 and 0% in the age group 51-above voted for the same.

**TABLE 11: CUSTOMER SERVICE CHANNEL PREFERRED OR AVAILED**

Age groups	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	Social media	Live chat
11-20	0%	17%	50%	83%	83%
21-30	23%	35%	47%	76%	71%
31-40	59%	64%	23%	29%	23%
41-50	83%	50%	17%	0%	17%
51-Above	100%	50%	0%	0%	0%

**TABLE 12: AGE WISE RESPONSE TO MEDIUM OF FEEDBACK**

Age group	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	social media
11-20	0%	17%	33%	100%
21-30	18%	24%	47%	53%
31-40	29%	23%	47%	48%
41-50	33%	35%	17%	0%
51-above	25%	50%	0%	0%

SOURCE: SURVEY DATA

The above tables (11 & 12) clearly highlights that the respondents in the age group 11-20 and 21-30 have given higher preference for social media and live chat as a medium of consumer service whereas the other age group respondents preferred traditional modes of consumer service more. Also in the feedback medium table, it is clear that the age groups 11-20 and 21-30 prefer social medium as a feedback medium more than the rest of the age groups.

**EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**

The educational qualification wise responses regarding the growth of customer-to-company in the present IT era are tabulated below:

**TABLE 13: EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION WISE RESPONSE**

Educational qualification	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	disagree	Strongly agree	total
Secondary	0	2	0	0	0	2
Higher secondary	3	1	0	0	0	4
undergraduate	1	2	2	4	0	9
graduate	8	10	0	4	0	22
Post graduate	4	5	1	3	0	13

Source: Survey Data

The above table highlights that the respondents in the secondary and higher secondary category have strongly voted for the growth of customer-to-company dialogue in the era of IT (almost 100%). 33% respondents in the undergraduate category, 82% in the graduate and 69% in the post graduate category voted for the same. So there is a difference in the educational qualification wise response to the role of IT in enhancing customer-to-company dialogue.

**TABLE 14: CONSUMER SERVICES MEDIUM PREFERENCE**

Educational qualification	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	Social media	Live chat
Secondary	0%	0%	50%	100%	50%
Higher secondary	0%	25%	50%	100%	100%
Undergraduate	67%	44%	11%	11%	11%
Graduate	45%	54%	32%	55%	36%
Post graduate	54%	46%	38%	54%	62%

Source: Survey Data

**TABLE 15: FEEDBACK MEDIUM USED**

Educational qualification	Personal contact	Phone calls	Emails	Social media
Secondary	0	0	0	100
Higher secondary	0	25	50	100
Undergraduate	22	0	11	11
Graduate	18	23	11	41
Post graduate	23	23	53	54

Source: Survey Study

The above tables (14 & 15) clearly highlights that the first two categories respondents (secondary and higher secondary) have given higher preference for social media and live chat as a medium of consumer service whereas the other age group respondents preferred traditional modes of consumer service more, specially the undergraduate degree holders. Also in the feedback medium table, it is clear that the first two category respondents (secondary and higher secondary) prefer social medium as a feedback medium more than the rest of the age groups.

**EXPECTATIONS**

**GENDER**

Gender wise response for preference or availing of personalized and mass communications is tabulated below:

**TABLE 16: GENDER WISE RESPONSES**

GENDER	PERSONALISED COMM.	MASS COMM.
MALE	80%	24%
FEMALE	76%	32%

Source: Survey Study

The above table shows that male respondents (80%) prefer or avail more personalized marketing communications than female respondents (76%) whereas in case of mass communications, the response is otherwise. Their preference for personalized communication is seen to be dependent on their medium of connectivity, consumer service and feedback they prefer or bank upon.

**EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**

educational qualification wise response for personalized and mass communication is tabulated below:

**TABLE 17**

Educational qualification	Personalized communication	Mass communication
Secondary	100%	0%
Higher secondary	100%	0%
Under graduate	55%	45%
Graduate	86%	36%
Post graduate	100%	15%

Source: Survey Data

The table above highlights that secondary and higher secondary categorized respondents showed more preference towards personalized marketing communication than mass communication. Except the undergraduate degree holders in the sample taken, all other groups showed preference for personalized communications. Their preference for personalized communication is seen to be dependent on their medium of connectivity, consumer service and feedback they prefer or bank upon.

**AGE**

Age wise response for preference or availing of personalized and mass communications is tabulated below:

**TABLE 18**

Age groups	Personalized comm.	Mass communications
11-20	100%	0%
21-30	100%	11%
31-40	82%	5%
41-50	50%	33%
51-above	15%	100%

Source: Survey Study

The above table clearly highlights that 11-20, 21-30 and 31-40 prefer more personalized marketing communications than the age groups 41-50 and 51-above. Similarly, their response to personalized or mass communication seem to be dependent on the medium of connectivity and consumer service they prefer or bank upon.

**CONVENIENT SHOPPING HOURS**

**GENDER**

Gender wise response to convenient shopping hours:

**TABLE 19**

Gender	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
Male	28%	32%	64%	68%
Female	44%	40%	44%	48%

Source: Survey Study

The survey showed that male respondents find evening and night hours as more suitable or convenient for shopping in contrast to their female counterparts.

**EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION**

Educational qualification wise response to convenient shopping hours.

**TABLE 20: EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATION WISE RESPONSE TO CONVENIENT SHOPPING HOURS**

Qualification	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
secondary	0%	0%	100%	100%
Higher secondary	0%	0%	75%	100%
undergraduate	67%	55%	44%	33%
graduate	32%	45%	45%	54%
Post graduate	38%	23%	61%	62%

Source: Survey Study

The above table highlights that secondary and higher secondary respondents strongly preferred evening and night hours as convenient for shopping. Similarly, graduate and post graduate respondents also showed strong preference for the same. However, undergraduate category showed more preference for morning and afternoon hours.

TABLE 21: AGE WISE RESPONSE

Age	Morning	Afternoon	Evening	Night
11-20	0%	0%	83%	100%
21-30	17%	18%	82%	83%
31-40	53%	41%	35%	41%
41-50	50%	67%	17%	33%
51-above	75%	100%	25%	0%

Source: Survey Study

The above table clearly highlights that the age groups 11-20 and 21-30 strongly preferred evening and night hours as convenient hours for shopping. The age groups 31-40 and 41-50 also preferred morning and afternoon hours as convenient shopping hours than evening and night hours. But in cas of the age group 51-above, the preference was strong towards morning and afternoon hours of shopping.

## INTERPRETATIONS

1. The percentage of male respondents voting for consumer connectivity in the era of IT more than the percentage of female respondents. This difference can be traced back to the medium of connectivity they prefer or avail of. The study highlighted that the male respondents showed greater preference towards social media connectivity and emails than the female respondents; who preferred personal contact medium more than the male respondents.
2. Similarly, respondents belonging to different age groups and educational qualifications responded differently towards consumer connectivity in the era of IT. Their responses can be traced to the medium of connectivity they prefer or avail of. Those respondents who prefer social media and emails as a connecting medium showed positive response towards consumer connectivity in the era of IT. So, the medium of connectivity preferred by the respondents has a strong influence on their perception towards to the role of IT in enhancing connectivity among the consumers.
3. Regarding the growth of customer-to-company dialogue in the era of IT, gender wise responses varied. Male respondents responded more positively towards the role of IT in the growth of customer-to-company dialogue than the female respondents. Difference in their opinions or perceptions can be linked up to the medium of customer service and feedback preferred or used by them. Male respondents showed more preference towards live chat and social media as a medium of customer service and feedback as compared to the female respondents. Similar is the case with the respondents belonging to different age groups and educational qualifications. So, the medium of customer service preferred or availed by the respondents has a strong influence on their perception towards to the role of IT in enhancing customer –to- company dialogue in the era of IT.
4. Expectations in the study cater to only two dimensions: marketing communications and shopping hours preferred. Gender wise responses differed with respect to these two dimensions. Male respondents showed more preference towards personalized marketing communications and evening and night hours as convenient shopping hours than their female counterparts. This difference can be linked up to the customer service and connectivity medium they prefer. Similar is the case with the other two demographic variables: age and educational qualifications.

## CONCLUSION

We have looked at three ways that consumer behavior has changed, from connected consumers to changed expectations and new communication tools use with respect to the demographic variables: age, gender and educational qualification. The study revealed that the medium of connectivity, feedback and customer service preferred or availed by people has a strong influence on the effectiveness of information technology in their buying behavior. If people can take advantage of information technology in making various purchase decisions, the statement “customer is king” would no longer be a myth in today’s world.

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