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## **Exploiting local market as a strategy for uplifting Sri Lankan tea industry: A case of consumer buying behavior in Kegalle**

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Sri Lankan tea industry is not performing well in global tea market due to various imperfections. However, still enough attention is not paid to develop the local tea market. This is important in the case of drawbacks in global markets. There is a great potential to develop the local tea market with the best tea grades and value added products produced domestically as local economy and middle income consumer base is growing. This study focuses the potentials of local tea market through the lens of consumer behavior of tea. It studies the purchase decisions and buying behavior of local tea consumers in Kegalle district. About 120 respondents from two urban and two rural GN divisions were surveyed with interviewer directed questionnaires by purposive sampling. Demographic features including age, gender, living sector, education level, employment, monthly income and importance of seven pre-determined factors (quality, price, brand, package, past experience, others recommendations and the loyalty of the buying place) affecting decision making were recorded on five point Likert scales. Data on buying behavior dimensions including buying frequency, buying place, form of tea bought frequently, type of tea bought frequently and quality attributes considered when buying were also collected. Then, the consideration levels of seven pre-determined factors and buying behavior dimensions were separately analyzed against the demographic factors of the respondents by using Chi-square test and Spearman correlation test. It revealed that the local tea market can be fully exploited if the quality of tea is improved, especially the taste. The differences in buying behaviors of local tea consumers were driven by income levels and living sectors. Since the tea consumers with higher income levels are more conscious on brands, marketers must take more efforts on developing strong brand image. Also, it must be invested more on the brand promotions by supermarkets on the tea buying location. Popularity of flavored teas among local consumers found very low. Only 3.4% of the total respondents were buying flavored teas and all of them were urban dwellers. The study suggested to try out tea with special tastes at local tea shops for high end consumers and to induce tea consumption as a passion. Marketers can sell branded products to the consumers with lower income levels too, if they offer tea at lower prices. But much care should be taken when serving both market segments together as their perceptions are controversial. If the individual marketers put their maximum efforts to succeed their businesses, this will at least contribute to uplift the Sri Lankan tea industry.

**Keywords:** Buying behavior, Consumer, Local market, Purchasing decision, Tea