

Preferences for Use and Cleaning of Soft Furnishings in Household Spaces: A Survey among Homemakers in Kerala

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ABSTRACT

Soft furnishings play a vital role in enhancing the comfort, aesthetics and functionality of home interiors. The present study conducted among home makers of Kerala explores the patterns of use and cleaning practices adopted for the maintenance of soft home furnishings in various household areas. The research design adopted was survey method which was conducted among 100 home makers of Kerala State in India using a structured questionnaire to gather information regarding the use and care preferences of different soft furnishing items in various household spaces. The frequency of use of soft furnishing items in various rooms in different households was not the same. Income and socioeconomic status had some influence on the preference for soft furnishing items in various rooms and the cleaning and maintenance practices are determined by the nature of furnishing items in each space. A statistically significant association was found by Fisher's exact test between the type of furnishing items and method and frequency of cleaning them. The findings of the study provide valuable insights into household management practices, product development and consumer behaviour in the soft furnishings industry.

Keywords: Soft furnishings, Cleaning frequency, Cleaning methods, Household spaces, Interior, Consumer behaviour

INTRODUCTION

Soft furnishings play an important role in enhancing the comfort, aesthetics and functionality in a home. Home furnishings are essential part of home décor (Singh and Sharma 2016). Interior Furnishings feature items like rugs, carpets, durries, bed sheets, bed spreads, upholstery, curtains, pillow covers, cushion covers, table linens, towels, napkins, gloves, mittens, and aprons (Paul *et al.*, 2017). Soft furnishings, ranging from kitchen towels to luxurious living room drapes, constitute essential elements within residential environments. Indian home makers consider it as a pride in doing up their homes by attractive soft furnishings (Devi, 2019). Furnishings and decorations particularly in living room not only serve the practical purposes but also help to satisfy self-identification needs and social connectedness (Valadez-Martínez, 2019). Decor and furnishings also play a significant role in enhancing mental and physical wellbeing (Ruhil *et al.*,

2017).

The use of home furnishing items has evolved and developed together with the human needs and demands showing that it is not a new concept (Radhika and Thilakam, 2024). The present study throws light on the use of soft furnishing items in each living spaces in a home. Fabrics in interior furnishing protect the house against fading, deterioration, sun glare and draughts, while providing privacy and thermal regulation (Vasanthy and Chandramohan, 2023). They also reduce noise and improve acoustics thereby enhancing liveability and make the rooms more comfortable and functional.

However, the durability and cleanliness of these soft furnishings are highly dependent on the cleaning procedures adopted by the home makers. Difference in use, care and maintenance of kitchen furnishings even influenced the bacterial contamination level (Sukumaran and Devi, 2021). In order to control the microbes that cause illness and odour proper laundering is essential

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(Abney *et al.*, 2021). Laundry methods include machine washing, hand washing, dry cleaning and drying (Laitala *et al.*, 2020). Selection of the cleaning methods may be directly affected by the material and design of the specific soft furnishings.

The effective removal of dirt and microorganisms are influenced by the variables of Sinner's circle. Sinner's circle refers to a conceptual model that is used to describe the four key factors - temperature, time, chemistry, and mechanical action- that contribute to effective cleaning processes. Adjusting one factor often requires changes in the others to maintain optimal cleaning performance (Schages *et al.*, 2020).

This study was conducted with the objectives to analyse the preference for different furnishing items, influence of socioeconomic status and income of the household on the selection and use of furnishings and to understand the intricate association between cleaning preferences and the type of soft furnishings present in different living spaces. The present study was conducted in Kerala where the cultural and environmental factors may influence the cleaning practices. The study was intended to collect information regarding the furnishing items used in different rooms, most commonly used cleaning techniques for various types of soft furnishing items in different household spaces. This collected data will be helpful to develop a predictive model that can throw light on the specific soft furnishing items that require special handling during cleaning process. The implications of this study are significant for understanding product development, household management, and consumer behaviour within the soft furnishings industry.

METHODOLOGY

A survey was conducted to study the use and care of soft home furnishings in the households in the beginning of the year 2022. The geographical regions selected for conducting the survey are different parts of Kerala. Since the information to be collected is regarding the use and care of soft home furnishings, the sample for study mainly comprised of 100 women who take care of the households. The researcher developed a questionnaire to collect information regarding the demographic details; soft home furnishing items used in different rooms and the care and maintenance of the soft home furnishing items used. A visual guide was also prepared to help the subjects identify the names of different soft furnishing

items used in different household spaces.

The developed questionnaire was converted to Microsoft forms and the link was generated for sharing with the respondents. Revised Kuppuswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale for the year 2021 was used to calculate the Socio-economic status of the respondents (Saleem and Jan, 2021). The visual guide for identifying the soft furnishings was also embedded in the online questionnaire wherever needed. The link was shared through the social media to get a wider reach.

The data received was consolidated in the Microsoft excel sheet which was later analysed. Graphical representations were generated in Microsoft excel. Statistical tool used for analysis was Fisher's exact test. As the contingency table was large in size, R software was used to perform the Fisher's exact test. *JASP* software was used to perform descriptive statistical analysis.

Ethical Statement:

Prior to participation, informed consent was obtained from all homemakers. They were informed about the purpose of conducting the survey and assured of confidentiality and anonymity in data handling and reporting. Participants were informed about the absence of monetary benefits and that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without penalty.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the survey were consolidated and analysed and are discussed as given below:

Demographic Profile of the Selected Respondents:

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents of the study. The socioeconomic status of the respondents was identified using Revised Kuppuswamy Socioeconomic Status Scale for the year 2021 (Saleem and Jan, 2021).

A majority of respondents resided in Panchayat areas (72%). A smaller portion of the respondents lived in city corporations (16%) and municipalities (12%).

The socio-economic distribution shows that the highest frequency of the respondents belonged to the upper middle class (55%). There were also a significant number of families in lower middle class (20%) and upper class (16%), The upper lower and lower classes were

Table 1 : Demographic profile of the respondents

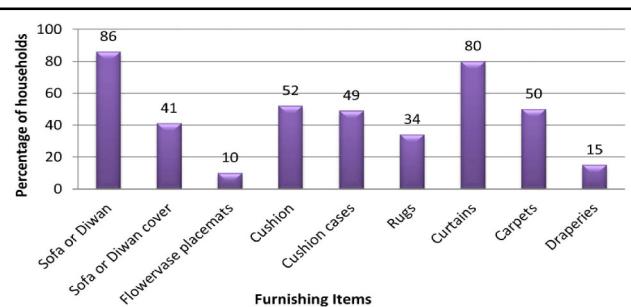
Demographic Profile	Number of Respondents (N=100)
Place of residence	
City Corporation	16
Municipality	12
Panchayat	72
Socio-economic Status	
Upper	16
Upper middle	55
Lower middle	20
Upper Lower	8
Lower	1

less in number with 8% and 1% respondents, respectively.

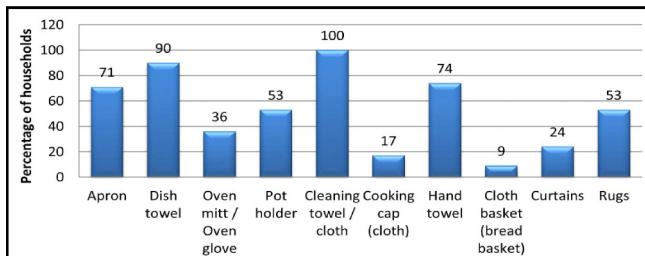
Types of Soft Furnishings Used in the Households:

The type of soft furnishings items used in different households was identified through the survey.

The study on use of home furnishing items in living room among the house holds from Fig. 1 reveals that the sofa or diwan (86%) were the most commonly used item followed by curtains (80%), carpets (50%) and cushions (52%). Sofa or diwan covers (41%), rugs (34%) and cushion cases (49%) were also commonly found. Other items like draperies (15%) and flower-vase placemats (10%) were found to be used less frequently.

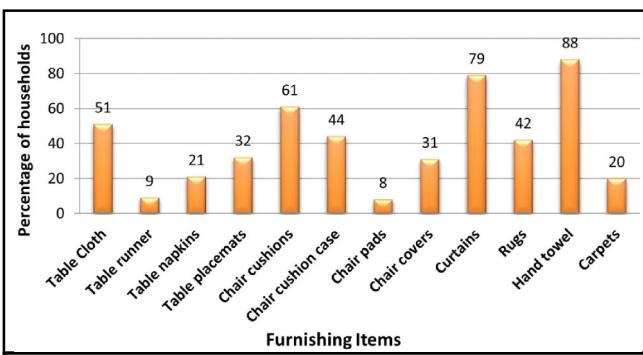
**Fig. 1 : Use of soft home furnishings in living rooms**

The study on the use of kitchen textiles of households in Fig. 2 showed that cleaning towels (100%) were used

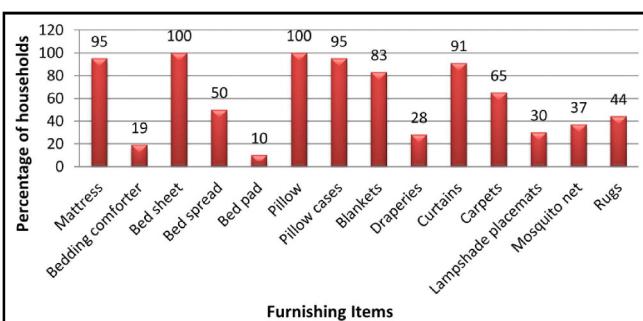
**Fig. 2 : Use of soft home furnishings in kitchen**

in all households, followed by dish towels (90%), hand towels (74%) and Aprons (71%). Pot holders (53%) and rugs (53%) were also used in some households. Oven mitts or oven gloves (36%) and curtains (24%) were used lesser in kitchen. Cooking caps (17%) and cloth baskets (9%) were found to be used less.

The analysis regarding soft furnishings used in dining rooms in Fig. 3 indicates that hand towels (88%) and curtains (79%) were the most prevalent items among the households. Chair cushions (61%) and table cloths (51%) were also found in many households. Chair cushion cases (44%), rugs (42%), Table placemats (32%), chair covers (31%), table napkins (21%) and carpets (20%) were used moderately. Table runners (9%) and chair pads (8%) were used less frequently.

**Fig. 3 : Use of soft home furnishings in dining room**

The study on bedroom soft furnishings among households in Fig. 4 shows that bed sheets and pillow (100%) were present in all homes. Mattresses (95%), pillow cases (95%), Curtains (91%) and blankets (83%) were found in majority of bedrooms. Carpets (65%), bed spreads (50%), rugs (44%) and mosquito nets (37%) were used in some households, while draperies (28%) and bedding comforters (19%) were less common. Bed pads (10%), and lampshade placemats (3%) were found to

**Fig. 4 : Use of soft home furnishings in bedrooms**

be used rarely.

From Fig. 5, it is evident that bath towels (100%) were used in all homes. Bathroom mats (81%) and hand towels (60%) were found in a significant number of households. Shower curtains (4%) were less common.

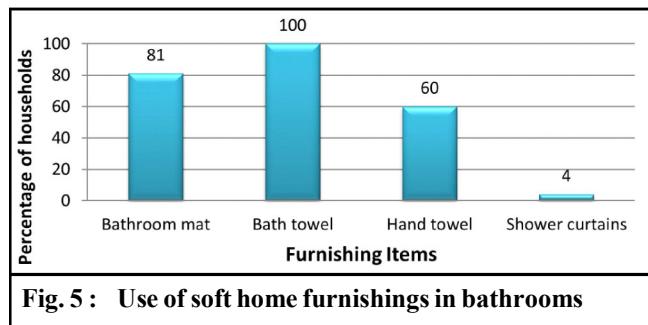


Fig. 5 : Use of soft home furnishings in bathrooms

Table 2 shows the distribution of number of furnishing items in different rooms by socio-economic status. In the living room there is a clear gradient from the upper class to lower class. This indicates the use of a greater number of items in the living rooms of the households of upper socio-economic status. Numbers of items in kitchen and dining room were found to be non-linear. Dining room items were reported to be used more in upper lower-class households than upper or upper middle. The number of items in bedroom was found to be consistently substantial across socio-economic statuses. This emphasises the priority given to comfortable sleep across the socio-economic status of all households. Similarly for bathroom furnishing items also, a remarkable uniformity

was observed among the classes.

Table 3 shows the distribution of furnishing items in different rooms by income level. The bedroom showed the highest mean number of items across all income levels. This indicates that the bedroom is a primary space where the different types of furnishing items were used regardless of income. The dining room and kitchen also shows relatively stable means, with dining room items and kitchen items. Furnishing items used in these rooms were also not much influenced by the income level. In contrast, the living room showed a wider variation with mean items increasing with income. This indicates an increase in discretionary household items with higher income. The bathroom has the lowest number of items with minimal variations across income groups.

Association between Type of Home Furnishings and Cleaning Parameters:

The Fisher's Exact Test was conducted to determine if there is a statistically significant association between the types of furnishings in different household spaces and the cleaning methods used for each and the results are presented in Table 4.

From Table 4, the living room furnishings include items such as sofas, covers, cushions, rugs, curtains, and carpets. Based on F-test, the obtained p-value is 0.00009999, which is lesser than significance level. Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. Therefore, there is association between the type of furnishing and method of cleaning

Table 2 : Average number of furnishing items in different rooms by socio-economic status

Room Type	Upper (n=16) Mean ± SD	Upper Middle (n=55) Mean ± SD	Lower Middle (n=20) Mean ± SD	Upper Lower (n=8) Mean ± SD	Lower (n=1) Mean ± SD
Living Room	4.69 ± 2.30	4.58 ± 2.11	3.55 ± 2.44	2.25 ± 2.05	1.00
Kitchen	5.31 ± 1.78	5.24 ± 1.64	5.00 ± 2.13	6.00 ± 1.51	6.00
Dining Room	5.19 ± 2.69	4.78 ± 2.35	4.20 ± 2.63	6.63 ± 2.26	3.00
Bedroom	8.75 ± 2.35	8.46 ± 2.28	7.85 ± 3.18	9.88 ± 2.75	6.00
Bathroom	2.81 ± 0.66	2.51 ± 0.57	2.10 ± 0.72	2.13 ± 0.84	3.00

Table 3: Descriptive statistics of number of items in household rooms by income level

Income Level* (Monthly)	N	Dining Room (Mean ± SD)	Living Room (Mean ± SD)	Bedroom (Mean ± SD)	Kitchen (Mean ± SD)	Bathroom (Mean ± SD)
≤Rs. 6,174	4	5.50 ± 2.38	2.00 ± 1.41	8.75 ± 2.22	5.50 ± 1.73	3.00 ± 0.00
Rs. 6,175 - Rs. 18,496	15	4.27 ± 2.82	2.93 ± 2.31	8.07 ± 3.39	5.07 ± 2.31	2.13 ± 0.74
Rs. 18,497 - Rs. 30,830	17	4.77 ± 2.25	4.18 ± 2.40	8.29 ± 2.39	5.12 ± 1.41	2.24 ± 0.66
Rs. 30,831 - Rs. 46,128	10	5.00 ± 2.26	3.90 ± 2.23	8.60 ± 1.78	5.20 ± 1.40	2.50 ± 0.53
Rs. 46,129 - Rs. 61,662	18	5.44 ± 2.12	5.39 ± 1.72	8.78 ± 2.34	5.44 ± 1.89	2.50 ± 0.71
Rs. 61,663 - Rs. 123,321	19	4.21 ± 2.68	4.11 ± 2.31	8.05 ± 2.39	5.16 ± 1.74	2.42 ± 0.61
≥ Rs. 123,322	17	5.35 ± 2.81	4.71 ± 2.31	9.00 ± 2.92	5.53 ± 1.77	2.77 ± 0.66

*Modified Kuppuswamy SES scale, 2021 (Saleem and Jan, 2021).

for Living room.

Soft furnishing items used in kitchen are aprons, dish towels, oven mitts, pot holders, and cleaning towels. Based on F-test, the obtained p-value is 0.00039996, which is lesser than significance level. Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. Therefore, there is association between the type of furnishing and method of cleaning for Kitchen.

The dining room furnishings included tablecloths, chair cushions, and curtains. Based on F-test, the obtained p-value is 0.00009999, which is lesser than significance level. Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. There is association between the type of furnishings and method of cleaning for dining room.

Soft furnishing items that were used in bed room were mattresses, bedding comforters, sheets, pillows, and curtains. Based on F-test, the obtained p-value is 0.00009999, which is lesser than significance level. Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. There is association between the type of furnishing and method of cleaning for Bedroom.

Bathroom furnishings used in households were found to include mats, bath towels, and hand towels. Based on F-test, the obtained p-value is 0.0577942, which is greater than significance level. Therefore, it fails to reject the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. This shows that there is no association between the type of furnishing items in bathroom and method of cleaning. This non-significance may be due to a more uniform approach to cleaning bathroom items. These items were mostly machine washed showing its effectiveness in maintaining hygiene for items frequently exposed to moisture and potential contaminants.

From Table 5, the results of Fisher's exact test for testing association between soft furnishings and frequency of cleaning can be comprehended. Based on F-test conducted to study the association between furnishing items in all the rooms like living room, kitchen, dining room, bedroom and bathroom the obtained p-value is 0.00009999, which is lesser than significance level. Therefore, it rejects the null hypothesis at 0.05 significance level for two-sided test. Therefore, there is association between the type of furnishing items and frequency of cleaning in all these rooms. The results suggest that the type of soft furnishing item in each room significantly influences the frequency of cleaning in these areas.

The sofa or diwan and its cover were cleaned on a weekly and monthly basis, which was in line with their frequent use and the need to maintain cleanliness. Common items like curtains and cushion cases were mostly cleaned monthly and yearly. Though they were essential to overall room hygiene, they do not require much frequent cleaning as other furnishings. Items such as dish towels and cleaning towels/cloths were mostly cleaned daily, depicting the necessity for maintaining the hygiene in the kitchen. In the dining room, the cleaning frequencies for items like table cloths and hand towels were predominantly weekly and daily, respectively. Curtains and rugs were mostly cleaned monthly and yearly, indicating that while they contribute to the room's ambiance, they were not subjected to as frequent cleaning as other more heavily used items. Highlighting the need for regular maintenance, pillow cases and bed sheets were cleaned weekly. Bathroom furnishing items like bath towels and hand towels exhibited a high frequency of daily and weekly cleaning. These items were important for maintaining personal hygiene and also to prevent the spread of germs in a moisture intense environment.

Conclusion:

The distribution of living room furnishing items among the different households showed the existence of an income-related gradient which indicates distinct socio-economic influences. Consistency was observed in bedroom and bathroom furnishings across the groups. Kitchen and dining room furnishings seem to be less affected by income and more driven by functional needs or cultural factors. The present study also focuses on the preference for soft furnishing items and cleaning methods adopted in various household areas. Soft furnishing items that were frequently used were either machine or hand washed. Items requiring careful laundering were also hand washed. Based on their material, design, and maintenance requirements, other cleaning methods such as dry cleaning, vacuum cleaning, brushing, dusting, and sun drying were used for specific furnishing items. The statistical analysis confirms that for the living room, kitchen, dining room, and bedroom, there was a significant association between the type of furnishings and their methods of cleaning. For the bathroom furnishings no significant association was found. This suggests that the methods of cleaning for bathroom furnishings may be less influenced by the type of furnishing compared to other rooms. The findings of the

Table 4 : Fisher's exact test for testing association between soft furnishings and the method of cleaning

Items	Total users	Method of cleaning					p-value
		Machine wash	Hand wash	Dry cleaning	Vacuum cleaning	Brushing and dusting	
Living room furnishings							
Sofa or Diwan	86	10	9	3	17	31	16
Sofa or Diwan cover	41	19	10	5	4	3	0
Flower-vase placemats	10	2	2	0	0	5	1
Cushion	52	7	5	3	6	15	16
Cushion cases	49	23	15	1	2	6	2
Rugs	34	7	15	0	3	5	4
Curtains	80	39	27	9	0	3	2
Carpets	50	6	25	4	6	5	4
Draperies	15	6	3	2	1	3	0
Kitchen furnishings							
Apron	71	22	37	5	3	2	2
Dish towel	90	23	58	5	0	3	1
Oven mitt / Oven glove	36	18	12	0	0	2	4
Pot holder	53	13	31	2	1	4	2
Cleaning towel / cloth	100	23	69	0	0	2	6
Cooking cap (cloth)	17	6	10	0	0	0	1
Hand towel	74	24	49	0	0	1	0
Cloth basket (bread basket)	9	1	7	0	0	1	0
Curtains	24	13	8	1	0	1	1
Rugs	53	14	26	1	4	6	2
Dining room furnishings							
Table Cloth	51	23	19	3	2	4	0
Table runner	9	5	2	0	0	1	1
Table napkins	21	9	11	0	0	0	1
Table placemats	32	8	13	1	0	7	3
Chair cushions	61	7	8	1	3	17	25
Chair cushion case	44	12	11	4	2	10	5
Chair pads	8	0	1	0	0	2	5
Chair covers	31	10	14	1	0	4	2
Curtains	79	39	23	6	1	9	1
Rugs	42	16	15	0	3	5	3
Hand towel	88	41	42	0	1	4	0
Carpets	20	4	7	0	2	4	3
Bedroom furnishings							
Mattress	95	0	13	4	16	26	36
Bedding comforter	19	5	2	1	2	5	4
Bed sheet	100	59	31	6	0	4	0
Bed spread	50	25	10	4	0	7	4
Bed pad	10	4	1	0	0	1	4
Pillow	100	11	18	8	3	10	50
Pillow cases	95	49	31	7	0	5	3
Blankets	83	43	21	11	1	2	5
Draperies	28	8	9	3	0	7	1
Curtains	91	44	30	10	2	4	1
Carpets	65	7	31	1	7	9	10
Lampshade placemats	30	3	6	2	3	9	7
Mosquito net	37	5	15	1	3	9	4
Rugs	44	9	15	0	5	9	6
Bathroom furnishings							
Bathroom mat	81	22	41	4	3	7	4
Bath towel	100	39	52	1	1	1	6
Hand towel	60	25	30	1	0	2	2
Shower curtains	4	3	0	0	0	0	1

** Significant at .01 level, ^{NS} Not Significant.

Table 5 : Fisher's exact test for testing association between soft furnishings and frequency of cleaning

Items	Total users	Frequency of Cleaning					p-value
		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Yearly	Seasonally	
Living room furnishings							
Sofa or Diwan	41	4	17	18	0	2	.000099**
Sofa or Diwan cover	86	9	33	29	6	9	
Flower vase placemats	10	1	3	3	1	2	
Cushion	52	1	17	24	3	7	
Cushion cases	49	3	12	30	2	2	
Rugs	34	4	17	5	3	5	
Curtains	80	0	12	45	9	14	
Carpets	50	4	21	21	0	4	
Draperies	15	0	5	5	3	2	
Kitchen furnishings							
Apron	71	24	36	11	0	0	.000099**
Dish towel	90	60	27	2	1	0	
Oven mitt / Oven glove	36	6	13	12	2	3	
Pot holder	53	25	20	6	1	1	
Cleaning towel / cloth	100	78	17	4	0	1	
Cooking cap (cloth)	17	7	7	1	1	1	
Hand towel	74	52	21	1	0	0	
Cloth basket (bread basket)	9	4	4	0	0	1	
Curtains	24	1	8	14	1	0	
Rugs	53	5	29	16	1	2	
Dining room furnishings							
Table Cloth	51	8	31	12	0	0	.000099**
Table runner	9	1	5	3	0	0	
Table napkins	21	9	11	1	0	0	
Table placemats	32	8	12	10	0	2	
Chair cushions	61	0	20	24	6	11	
Chair cushion case	44	1	13	21	2	7	
Chair pads	8	0	4	2	1	1	
Chair covers	31	0	11	18	0	2	
Curtains	79	1	15	47	7	9	
Rugs	42	0	20	17	1	4	
Hand towel	88	28	52	8	0	0	
Carpets	20	0	9	10	0	1	
Bedroom furnishings							
Mattress	95	8	39	21	13	14	.000099**
Bedding comforter	19	1	9	6	1	2	
Bed sheet	100	3	80	15	0	2	
Bed spread	50	3	25	17	2	3	
Bed pad	10	0	4	5	0	1	
Pillow	100	3	42	36	8	11	
Pillow cases	95	4	75	16	0	0	
Blankets	83	0	36	35	5	7	
Draperies	28	0	10	11	3	4	
Curtains	91	0	15	54	10	12	
Carpets	65	2	22	32	4	5	
Lampshade placemats	30	0	11	14	2	3	
Mosquito net	37	0	8	18	2	9	
Rugs	44	0	19	20	1	4	
Bathroom furnishings							
Bathroom mat	81	12	48	18	0	3	.000099**
Bath towel	100	64	32	3	1	0	
Hand towel	60	33	22	5	0	0	
Shower curtains	4	1	1	1	0	1	

** Significant at .01 level.

study may provide valuable insights into product development, household management practices and consumer behaviour in the soft furnishing industry. Similarly, statistical analysis confirms that for the living room, kitchen, dining room, bedroom and bathroom there was a significant association between the type of soft furnishing and frequency of cleaning.

Implications:

The findings of the study serve as a guide for the manufacturers to design furnishing items tailored to different socioeconomic groups and household spaces. The study provides an insight about frequency and methods of cleaning adopted by homemakers for different furnishing items. The influence of income and socioeconomic status of consumers on the selection and use of home furnishings is also an outcome of the study which is helpful for the retailers and marketers. The study also focuses on the cultural emphasis in Kerala, a state in India, highlighting the importance given for the decoration and maintenance of home furnishing items.

Limitations and recommendations:

The study was conducted among the home makers of 100 households in Kerala which may not fully represent the region and may limit the generalizability of the results. As the data collected was based on self-reporting, there is a chance of recall bias or statement of socially desirable answers. Details on fibre types or probability of staining and climatic influences were not studied. The potential of emerging cleaning techniques were not covered in the study.

In the future study, larger and more diverse sample size covering wider areas and cultural contexts can be included. Impact of fibre and fabric types on cleaning preferences and efficiency can be studied in future. Awareness programs can be conducted among homemakers regarding the best cleaning practices suitable for different furnishing items. Adoption of technological advancements like smart textiles and innovative cleaning practices and their acceptability can be studied.

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