

A Theoretical Approach to the Influence of Social Class on Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

The consumer decision making process is complex and important in determining purchase behavior. Many researches and marketers study in this field to identify how consumer makes purchasing decision. Consumer behavior is influenced by several factors and social class is also one of these factors. The purpose of this study is explaining how social class affects consumer behavior.

Keyword: Consumer Behavior; Consumer ; Social class; Social; stratification

1. Introduction

Consumer buying behavior presents a picture of complexity. In a multi brand market almost every customer has his own individual pattern of purchases through time (Lawrence, 1966: 216). Many researches in the consumer behavior literature, have involved the attempt to understand why consumers purchase and what factors influence consumer purchasing decision.

According to Rossiter and Foxall (2008), the direct causes of behavior are (a) initiating stimuli; (b) momentary motivation or 'drive' level; (c) habits, which include beliefs, attitudes, and values; and (d) external incentives. Social class is a correlate of the third of these causes, learned habits (Rossiter, 2012 : 89). In this study, we will focus on the influence of social class on consumer behavior.

In the late 1950's and early 1960's, several contributions to the marketing literature appeared that pointed to the significance of social class for understanding consumer behavior. These early writings drew heavily on Warner's conception of social class one which focused largely on position and prestige of families within relatively small, self contained communities. (Fisher James E., 1987: 496). Warner and his colleagues at the University of Chicago and Social Research, Inc. began demonstrating that members of different social classes displayed different purchase goals and shopping behaviors. The classes were thus motivational groupings as well as status categories cause, thereby, not merely correlate, of consumption choice (Coleman,1983: 265).

2. Consumer Behavior

The term of consumer is a broader term which emphasises not only the actual buyer or customer, but also its users (consumers). Sometimes, a product is purchased by the head of the family and used by the whole family, such as a refrigerator, a car, etc... (Khan 2006 : 9).

Consumer buyer behavior refers to the buying behavior of final consumers individuals and households who buy goods and services for personal consumption (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008: 130).

The consumer decision making process is important in determining purchase behavior. In order to offer an effective service, it is important to identify consumer segments, taking into account the benefits which the consumer seeks (Patwardhan, Flora, and Gupta, 2010: 57) For this reason, Consumer information search has been the focus of many articles studying consumer behavior during the last 30 years.

Most large companies research consumer buying decisions in great detail to answer questions about what consumers buy, where they buy, how and how much they buy, when they buy, and why they buy. Marketers can study actual consumer purchases to find out what they buy, where, and how much. (Kotler and Armstrong, 2008: 130)

Buying behaviour, a component of consumer behaviour, is influenced by many individual and environmental factors. Environmental factors, such as culture and family, as well as individual factors, such as attitude toward objects and lifestyle, have an influence of buying decisions (Mckinney, Traylor, Kincade, and Holloman, 2004: 389). According to the consumer behavior theories of Howard (1963) and also more recently Rossiter and Foxall (2008), the direct causes of behavior are (a) initiating stimuli; (b) momentary motivation or 'drive' level; (c) habits, which include beliefs, attitudes, and values; and (d) external incentives. Social class is a correlate of the third of these causes, learned habits (Rossiter, 2012 : 89). In this study, we will focus on the influence of social class on consumer behavior.

3. Social Class

Inequality within the sociology literature is assessed through stratification and has historically concentrated on castes, class, status, gender and perhaps age. Caste, gender and age are not relevant to the present discussion but Social class is our main subject (Lawson, Todd, 2002: 299). Social class refers to grouping of people who are similar in their behavior based upon their economic position in the market place (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1990:106). Social Classes have several characteristics (Gherasim 2013: 5);

- The same social class individuals have similar behaviours, including the preferences for clothing, housing, furniture, leisure services, mass media etc.
- Depending on the social class to which they belong, people lower or higher positions in society;
- A social class that a person belongs is determined by several variables (such as occupation, income, wealth, education, etc.).
- People can move from one class to another.

In some traditional societies social class is very difficult to change, but in some societies, any man or woman can become prime minister (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard and Hogg, 2006: 438). People who 'cross' social class barriers usually begin to do this when they are young. Income and education allows younger people to adopt lifestyles that are different to those of their parents (Lancaster, Reynolds, 2005: 59). Social mobility refers to the passage of individuals from one social class to another and social mobility can be upward, downward or even horizontal (Solomon, Bamossy, Askegaard and Hogg, 2006: 438);

- *Horizontal mobility* refers to movement from one position to another roughly equivalent in social status, like becoming a nurse instead of a junior school teacher.
- *Downward mobility* is, of course, not very desirable, but this pattern is unfortunately quite evident in recent years as redundant workers have been forced to join the dole queue or have joined the ranks of the homeless. In the United States, a conservative estimate is that 600,000 Americans are homeless.
- *Upward mobility* , People tend to improve their positions over time, but these increases are not usually dramatic enough to catapult them from one social class to another.

3.1. Components of Social Class

Nine variables have emerged as most important in the stream of sociological and other research concerned with social class. These nine variables were identified in an influential synthesis of social class research by Gilber and Kahl, grouped in the following manner (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1990:109);

- Economic variables. *Occupation, income and wealth* are of critical importance because what a person does for a living not only determines how much the family has to spend, but is extremely important in determining the deference given to family members.
- Interaction variables. *Personel prestige, association and socialization* are the essence of social class.
- Political variables. *Power, class consciousness and mobility* are important to understanding the political aspect of stratification systems.

3.2. How Large Are Social Classes ?

There is no unqualified answer to the question of how large specific social classes are. Table 1 shows some estimates, using measures of class used in contemporary marketing research. The Gilbert and Kahl definitions shown in Table 1 emphasize economic distinctions, especially the emphasis on capitalism and entrepreneurship, whereas the Coleman - Rainwater approach emphasizes how people interact with each other as equals, superiors, or inferiors, especially in their work relationship (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1990: 127).

The Gilbert-Kahl model is likely to prove of less interest in the long run to marketing people than the Coleman-Rainwater model, but the rationales for its six subdivisions illustrate contemporary academic thinking about class in the United States (Coleman,1983: 266).

Table 1:Tradition Social Class Behavior in America (Coleman,1983: 266)

TWO RECENT VIEWS OF THE AMERICAN STATUS STRUCTURE	
The Gilbert–Kahl New Synthesis Class Structure:^a A situations model from political theory and sociological analysis	The Coleman–Rainwater Social Standing Class Hierarchy:^b A reputational, behavioral view in the community study tradition
Upper Americans	Upper Americans
The Capitalist Class (1%) —Their investment decisions shape the national economy; income mostly from assets, earned/ inherited; prestige universality connections	Upper-Upper (0.3%) —The "capital S society" world of inherited wealth, aristocratic names
Upper Middle Class (14%) —Upper managers, professionals, medium businessmen; college educated; family income ideally runs nearly twice the national average	Lower-Upper (1.2%) —The newer social elite, drawn from current professional, corporate leadership
	Upper-Middle (12.5%) —The rest of college graduate managers and professionals; life style centers on private clubs, causes, and the arts
Middle Americans	Middle Americans
Middle Class (33%) —Middle level white-collar, top level blue-collar; education past high school typical; income somewhat above the national average	Middle Class (32%) —Average pay white-collar workers and their blue-collar friends; live on the "the better side of town," try to "do the proper things"
Working Class (32%) —Middle level blue-collar; lower level white-collar; income runs slightly below the national average; education is also slightly below	Working Class (38%) — Average pay blue-collar workers; lead "working class life style" whatever the income, school background, and job
Marginal and Lower Americans	Lower Americans
The Working Poor (11–12%) —Below mainstream America in living standard, but above the poverty line; low-paid service workers, operatives; some high school education	"A lower group of people but not the lowest" (9%) — Working, not on welfare; living standard is just above poverty; behavior judged "crude," "trashy"
The Underclass (8–9%) —Depend primarily on welfare system for sustenance; living standard below poverty line; not regularly employed; lack schooling	"Real Lower-Lower" (7%) —On welfare, visibly poverty-stricken, usually out of work (or have "the dirtiest jobs"); "bums," "common criminals"

4. How Social Class Can Influence the Consumer Behavior ?

As a general phenomenon, social stratification tends to be accepted as a fact of life (Bereday, 1977: 196). Every society stratifies its members into social classes according to their values to the society. The members of social class share common values and ways of thinking, speaking and behaving (Abraham, 2011: 3). Thus, consumers interact mostly with people of their own social class so that each class has about the same values and patterns of behaviour. Therefore, marketers must respond specifically to different groups (Gherasim, 2013: 5)

Marketers increasingly look at social class from a global perspective. In some societies such as India and Brazil class distinctions are clear, and status differences are great. In others such as Denmark and Canada differences are less extreme. In countries with strong class differences, where people live, the cars they drive, the types of clothing they wear, how much they travel and where they go to college are largely determined by social class (Hollensen, 2010 :119).

Social class has a significant impact on consumer behavior and this impact may start during childhood. Some researches argue that Children or young people start learning behaviors and obtaining the habits of life style from their family based on social class of family . Riesman, Glaser, and Denny (1950) argue that in the more affluent families, children acquire some understanding of the purchasing processes at a relatively early age.

Previous research findings appear to support this line of reasoning, showing that young people from upper socioeconomic backgrounds have greater awareness of, and preference for, commercial stimuli in their consumer environment. Specifically, some research suggests that young people from upper social classes may have stronger brand preferences and are more likely to seek information prior to decision making than their lower class counterparts (Moschis, Moore, 1979: 104)

Social class influences where and how people feel they should shop. Lower status people prefer local, face to face places where they get friendly service and easy credit, often in the neighborhood. Upper middle consumers feel more confident in their shopping ability. They will venture to new places to shop and will range throughout a store to find what they want (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1990: 141).

5. Summary

Although, It seems as a negative situation, Almost all societies are divided into different groups of people as a fact of real life and these groups of people are defined as social classes The members of social class share common values and ways of thinking, speaking and behaving. Social class is determined by income and various other factors such as: wealth, education, and occupation.

Consumer behaviour, is influenced by many individual and environmental factors and we believe that social class is one of the most important one of these factors. For instance, In Some countries with strong class differences, where people live, the cars they drive, the types of clothing they wear, how much they travel and where they go to college are largely determined by social class (Hollensen, 2010 :119). For instance, 'Eating out' and drinking wine were once pleasures only enjoyed regularly by upper class members of society. (Lancaster, Reynolds, 2005: 59).

Consumers have an image of what social class a store attracts and have an understanding of what shopping should be like in a store that appeals to their own social class. For instance, People in upper class want to a pleasant store atmosphere featuring exciting displays; lower classes emphasize acquiring household things or clothing as the enjoyable part of shopping (Engel, Blackwell and Miniard, 1990: 142).

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