

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT GROUP INFLUENCES ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

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Each consumer is a member of a culture, various subcultures, and a social class; most of us belong to a number of different groups and almost would like to belong to several others. A group is defined as two or more individuals who share a set of norms, values, or beliefs and interact to accomplish individual or mutual goals. A group becomes a reference group when an individual identifies with it so much that he or she takes on many of the value, attitudes or personal standards of group members. The degree of reference group influence varies across product and brands with factors such as (1) the visibility to the group, (2) the necessity/nonnecessity nature of the product, (3) the level of commitment the individual feels to a group, (4) the relevance of the behavior to the group, and (5) degree of individual's confidence in his own judgement in the purchase situation.

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The majority of people belong to more different groups at the same time and frequently they want to be included in other groups as well, but in a specific situation they report themselves to a single group. When a new situation appears or the conditions change, the individuals may report themselves to the rules of another group which becomes the reference group for the given situation. Most people prefer to adapt, more or less, to the group's rules, from politeness or the desire to not be left aside. The *norms* are the general, common expectations of behavior that are considered appropriate for everybody in a social context, indifferent of their position. A group's norms cover usually all the important behavioral aspects for the functioning of that group and breaking those rules can bring up penalties.

A *group* is defined by two or more persons that share the same norms, values and beliefs and have certain relationships with each other so their behavior becomes interdependent. A *reference group* is a group whose rules, *norms* and values are used by an individual as the base of his daily behavior.

Types of reference groups

Groups can be classified depending on many criteria, like the affiliation, the type of contact (frequent/occasional) or the attraction (positive/negative).

primary groups/secondary groups

The primary groups are formed by the persons that we meet most often: friends, close colleagues, family(it is usually the most powerful primary group). A primary group has a sufficiently low number to allow face to face contact, and the subjects' participation is characterized by cohesion and reciprocity which determines similar behaviors and beliefs within the group. The primary group is usually coherent and lasting being made of persons that think in a similar manner and have the same interests.

The secondary groups are formed by persons that meet occasionally and have certain common interests. These groups have lower influence on the attitudes' formation and the behavior's control., but can have influence within the common activity, usually special groups of persons whose common interests are above the ones of the rest of the secondary group.

affiliation group/dissociative groups

The affiliation groups are the ones to which the subject wants to belong. These groups can be very powerful in influencing the behavior, since the subject will adopt the group's behavior in the hope of his affiliation as member. The marketing frequently uses images of the affiliation groups suggesting in this way that usage of a certain product will determine the subject's advance to the quality of group member.

The dissociative groups are the ones to which the person does not want to belong. This tendency can have a negative effect on the behavior – the individual avoids certain products or behavioral aspects in order to not be assimilated by the dissociative group. Like in the case of the affiliation groups, the defining of the dissociative groups is purely subjective, varying from a group to another.

official groups/informal groups

The official groups are materialized in a known list of members, often recorded in a way or other (ex. associations, clubs). The structure and rules of the group are written under the form of a statute, the quality of member implies to respect certain rules, and the members' behavior is regulated during his affiliation to the group. The quality of member can bring special privileges, or can imply only responsibilities in order to satisfy the group's aspirations.

The informal groups are less structured and are generally based on friendship. These groups do not have written statutes even if in this case the pressure to be in conformity with the group is higher than in the official groups. They need to adopt a more rigorous behavioral standard and larger reference domains than in the official groups.

Though the marketers seem at first view to have more success in developing strategies and tactics to influence of formal groups (easier to identify and more accessible), experience proves that the informal groups are the one having higher power of influence because they are part of our daily routine (an example of the normative influence exercised by the reference group).

implicit groups

The implicit groups are the ones to which the affiliation is implicit, because of the age, gender, culture or education. They are sometimes named category groups. Though, at first sight, they seem to have no significant influence on the members behavior, because they are not constituted based on voluntariness, the subjects are however influenced by the conformity pressure of the group (for example, the manner in which teenagers and older people dress).

virtual groups (communities)

A virtual group is a community of persons that interact on-line on various themes of common interest or specific activities. These groups on anonymous are passing through an explosive development in the last years and share their opinions on the most diverse subjects – from movies, Barbie dolls, wines or medicines. The majority of the companies recognize the Internet's power and also know that the opinion of a real person has more power of influence than a promotional clip so they support the post in of the opinions related to their products on th own sites.

Reference group influences on the consumption process

The nature of reference group influence can take three forms:

- *informational influence* – the reference group is used as an informational source in the different stages of the decisional process. This type of influence appears when an individual uses the behaviors and opinions of the reference group members as reliable informational sources. This influence is based either on the similarity of buyer's desires and preferences with the ones of the group members or on the recognition of the group recommendations' quality.
- *normative influence (utilitarian influence)* – the reference group establishes the level of norms, values and aspirations of an individual in the process of consuming products and services. It is obvious when a person respect the rules and expectations of a group in order to gain a reward or to avoid a sanction. The normative influence is used in the ads that promise the social acceptance or popularity in consequence to using a certain product or suggests disapproval or rejection from the group if a certain product is not used (usually hygiene products);
- *identification influence (value-expressive influence)* - the reference group is used to validate, by comparison, the consumer's opinions, attitudes, norms and actual behavior. The individual

behaves in a manner consistent with the group's values because the individual's values and the group's values are the same.

The group's power of influence depends on a number of factors with predefined role:

1. the product/trademark's degree of visibility by the group members - the group's power of influence is higher for the products used visibly (sport shoes, cars, holidays etc.) and lower for the products used in a particular way (vitamins),
 - the product's degree of necessity - the group's power of influence is higher for the products that do not belong to the category of strict necessity, and enter the category of luxury products (jewels, holidays, hobbies etc).
 - the person's degree of involvement – if a person is dependent to a certain group, he/she will conform even more to the rules and expectations of that group;
 - the relevance of a person's behavior for the good functioning of the group;
 - the certainty of the buyer during the buying process – the group's influence is manifested especially in the case of specialty products (TV sets, furniture, cars and assurance policies), products for which the buyer relies on the specialized information of the reference group.[Hawkins, D., Best, R., Kenneth, C., *Consumer Behavior. Building Marketing Strategy*, Irwin McGraw Hill, 1998, pp.219-220]

The influence of the reference groups is not as powerful for all types of products or consume activities. For example, the low complexity products, for which the identified risk is low and can be tested before buying them are unlikely to be influenced by the reference groups. The impact of the reference groups can vary: reference group might determine the choosing of a certain category of products instead of other (healthy food instead of fast-food) and can further influence the option for the trademark (Peugeot car or Toyota car).

Some reference groups include persons that the consumers know and have contact with, while others are made of persons with whom he might identify or admire. Because people have the tendency to compare themselves with others they consider similar, many marketing activities include ordinary persons sustaining positive opinions about a certain products. The probability such a person to be included in a consumer's reference group depends on many factors, among which:

- *propinquity* – studies show that people interact most frequently with the persons in their immediate vicinity;
- *mere exposure* – the persons met on regular bases (daily or by media exposure) are appreciated or the goods promoted constantly(for example, a candidate has greater chances to win elections if he is more present in the media environment);
- *cohesiveness* – means the degree of intimacy and dependence of the group's members to one another, as well as the importance they give to the group's declared values. When the individuals respect strictly the group rules, it is more probable that the group has a more powerful influence on the consume habits. [Solomon, M., *Consumer Behavior*, Prentice Hall, 2002, pp.321-322]

Persons want to belong to a group because of the status and the promised benefits they obtain. They want to be associated with groups that have an attractive social status, considering they can promote socially or professionally. The groups have power due to their ability to influence persons that one to become members. Certain groups, because of their unique characteristics, are perceived as having a superior social status and more power of influence than other groups; these groups are usually selective with the individuals that aspire to membership, the degree of attraction being amplified in many situations by the difficulty of affiliation. The group's capacity to influence the actions of various persons (members or non-members of the group) is called *social power* and can have a number of forms:

- reward or coercive power - an individual's perception that a group has the ability to mediate rewards or punishment for him/her;
- legitimate power – an individual's perception that a group has a legitimate right to prescribe behavior for him/her;

- expertise power - an individual's perception that a group has some special knowledge or expertness;
- referent power – an individual's identification with group. *Referent power* is described as the perceived status, standards, position, value or prestige of groups which influence individuals to seek membership into its ranks. [Dawson, M., Chatman E., *Reference group theory with implications for information studies: a theoretical essay*, Information Research, Vol.6, Nr.3, aprilie 2001]

The profound investigation of the consume particularities determined by the affiliation to a certain group lead to the defining of the term of consumption subculture. The consumption subculture is represented by distinctive subgroup of the society, whose members are selecting themselves on the base of the particular interest for a category of products (e.g. motorcycles), a trademark (e.g. Harley-Davidson) or a certain activity (sport fishermen). Such subcultures need a certain social structure, a common set of interests and values and a jargon or special expression rituals. Most consume subcultures are beneficiary of specialized media, especially reviews by which they can be influenced through precisely targeted marketing programs. The marketers are interested in comprehending these subcultures because they represent some consume rituals that can be exploited commercially.

The conclusion is that reference groups present the following characteristics:

1. the individuals are influenced by the groups they considered important from the social point of view;
2. individuals use certain groups to define their own behavior and attitudes in different situations (normative reference groups);
3. individuals report themselves to other groups or persons (comparative reference groups);
 - individuals can use more types of reference groups to define their own behavior and attitudes (multiple reference groups);
 - certain groups that the individuals use for model have power of influence on them even if they belong or not to the respective groups.

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