

SUBCULTURE AND THE CONSUMER BEHAVIOR



Apparently it seems that culture of a particular country or a society is homogeneous, but in reality it is composed of a larger number of more or less distinct groups. Each of these groups is known as a subculture. The knowledge of subculture provides important guidelines to marketers in formulating strategies for effective performance of marketing activities.

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Lesson - 1 & - 2 : Different Types of Subculture and Their Influences on Consumption

Objectives of these lessons

After reading these lessons, you will be able to:

- Understand the subcultural context of consumer behavior
- Define subculture
- Identify different types of subcultures
- Know how different subcultures affect buying behavior
- Explain them for marketing decision making.

Introduction

Subculture is a part of the culture containing the important features of the main culture. In this lesson we shall highlight on the subcultural context, types of subcultures, subcultural influence on consumer behavior as well as marketing implications of the concept of subculture.



Subcultural Context Affecting Consumer Behavior

Culture, you know, is an extremely broad and encompassing term. It includes what we have learned, our history, values, morals, customs, art, and habit. Marketing takes place within a given culture. Marketers should know that experience, history, values, morals, customs, art, habit, etc. vary within a given culture requiring different marketing programs. Not everyone in the same country or society shares the same behavioral pattern of the dominant or main culture. It clearly indicates that there are subcultures, such as those of northerners, southerners, city-dwellers, the poor, teen agers, elderly, religious groups and so on. The identification of a subculture may provide a firm with a segment of a market that it can develop. For example, products have been developed in great quantity for the teenage subculture, and advertising has been directed to these consumers. Each subculture, like a larger culture, has distinctive values, beliefs, and attitudes that the marketer must understand if he is effectively to exploit them. It is not always easy to identify differences among subcultures, however, and marketers disagree, for instance, about whether there exists a northerners' market that is distinct from southerners' market. It is easy to develop mistaken stereotyped notions about subcultures due to the lack of proper knowledge on subcultures. Marketers are interested in identifying any subculture as a potential market for their products.

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The advertising of many products in a local newspaper like “Dainik Azadi” published from Chittagong, is an illustration of selling to subculture. The aggregation of people by demographic variables has long

been done by marketing research staffs. This is, of course, a way to study and measure the buying potential of a subculture. Such study is usually based on demographic variables such as age, occupation, income, race, religion etc. These classifications are illustrative of demographic variables. All of the demographic groups listed above may buy the same products, but each also has some unique needs and can, therefore, be classified as a separate market. The aged, for example, purchase some drugs made and marketed expressly for them. This relationship between demographic variables and purchasing behavior has long been studied by those in marketing. By this time you should understand that subcultural differences do exist and are responsible for differences in consumption patterns of people of different subcultures. Now question may come to your mind that, what actually subculture means. In the next section we shall try to define subculture as an attempt to respond to your query.

Defining Subculture

A Bangladeshi visiting to a foreign country may be considered similar to other Bangladeshis by a local individual. The same Bangladeshi may have a different and complicated identity here in Bangladesh. He may be one belonging to the northern part of Bangladesh, a Muslim, a reasonably successful businessman living in the capital city, a young unmarried individual, an old man living on pension, or a mid-level government official. No matter, what his identity here in the country, he is likely to conform to the principal norms and values of the dominant or mainstream Bangladesh culture. But, as because of his belongingness to a particular segment of the culture he will share certain cultural traits with others in the same segment unlike those of any other segment. The segments may be based on many variables. Some of the variables noteworthy to mention could be income, religion, region, occupation etc. Because of one's belongingness to a particular segment, he could display a different behavioral pattern. These behavioral differences may be well understood by a term known as subculture. In very much the same way as a culture is oriented around the common needs and problems of its members, so a subculture may be said to form around the common needs and problems of a social class.

Subculture may be said to form around the common needs and problems of a social class.

As there can be broad differences between the cultures of various societies, there can also be differences within the same culture. Every culture, therefore, contains subcultures, defined as groups that share the values and artifacts of the larger society, but also have distinctive practices, preferences, and beliefs. Businessmen living in the old part of Dhaka, cinema artists, and people living in the urban slums are all examples of subcultures. Islam is the dominant religion in the culture of Bangladesh; Sunni, Shiaa, and Baahaai, for example, may be viewed as subcultures within the larger Muslim culture here in Bangladesh.

Subculture may also be defined in terms of such factors as region, rural or urban residence, ethnic background, and religion. Those identified with a

subculture tend to think and act alike in certain respects, and this has important implications for their lifestyles. Recognition of this has led to experimentation with market segmentation as a means of developing effective marketing strategy adapted to market targets that are believed to have special prospect. Subculture is thus a part or segment of the main culture. As markets may be segmented according to different variables so as the culture. Subculture, therefore, may also be termed as cultural segmentation. If you divide the total culture in to small homogeneous groups, which may be reached with a distinct marketing mix, you can call each part a subculture.

Subculture may be termed as cultural segmentation.

It is thus a segment of the culture that shares distinguishing patterns of behavior. You can identify two important features analyzing this definition. Distinguishing patterns of behavior is the first aspect with regards to subculture that marketers need to emphasize. Members of a sub-cultural group must share behaviors that differ from those of the larger or dominant culture of a country. You can call a group or segment a subculture only when members of that group display a behavior pattern different from other groups.

The other important aspect or feature of subculture is that members of a subculture are very much part of the dominant culture. Behaviors of the members of a subculture largely coincide with those of the main culture as shown in the following figure, which is self-explanatory.

Figure-5.1: Showing Subculture’s Relation with the Main Culture

Main Cultural Behavior		
Northern subculture		Urban subculture
	Religious subculture	

Berkman and Gilson have defined subculture for marketing purposes as any cultural patterning that preserves important features of the dominant society but provides values and life styles of its own. Bangladeshis for example, hold certain types of values and maintain certain common norms around the country. But people of hill-tracts display different lifestyles though they hold common values of the Bangladesh culture. “The members of a specific subculture possess beliefs, values, and customs that set them apart from other members of the same society. In addition, they adhere to most of the dominant cultural beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns of the larger society. We define subculture, then, as a distinct

The cultural profile of a society or nation is a composite of two distinct elements.

cultural group that exists as an identifiable segment within a larger, more complex society. Thus, the cultural profile of a society or nation is a composite of two distinct elements: (1) the unique beliefs, values, and customs subscribed to by members of specific subcultures; and (2) the central or core cultural themes that are shared by most of the population, regardless of specific subcultural membership.”¹

You may look at this explanation in another way. Each Bangladeshi is, in large part, a product of the Bangladeshi way of life. Each Bangladeshi, however, is at the same time a member of various subcultures. A 16-year-old boy, for example, may simultaneously be a Muslim, a ‘Dhakaia’, and a teenager. It is expected that membership in each different subculture would provide its own set of specific beliefs, values, customs, and attitudes. The behavior patterns that distinguish subcultures are based on factors such as race, nationality, religion, urban and rural identification and so on.

Major Sub-Cultural Categories and Their Influences on Consumption

Subculture may be categorized into many different classes. Here in this unit we shall consider some of the important subcultural groups and show how they affect consumption and marketing decision. Following table shows (though not extensive) major subcultural categories:

Table- 5.1: Showing Major Sub-Cultural Categories

Categories	Examples
Ethnic (based on the ancestors’ birthplace)	English, Chinese, Arab
Religious	Muslim, Hindu, Christian
Regional	Northern, Southern, Central
Age	Teens, Middle aged, Elderly
Singles	Unmarried individuals
Gender	Male, Female
Occupation	Teachers, Doctors, Engineers
Social Class	Upper, Middle, Lower

Let us now have some idea on the major subcultural categories mentioned in the above table:

Ethnic Subculture

The ethnic subculture is based on the nationality of one’s ancestors who have migrated to a new country. It (nationality) may form a basis for a

¹ Schiffman L.G., and Kanuk L.L., *Consumer Behavior, Sixth Edition, Prentice-Hall of India, p. 440.*

subculture when the members of that nationality group identify with it and base at least some of their behaviors on the norms of the national group. Ethnic subculture is usually found in affluent countries where people migrate from other parts of the world with the hope of a better life and live-li-hood. Though ethnic groups may lose their nationality over time, but in fact ethnic identification is held from one generation to the next through a number of institutions.

Though the citizens of a particular country see themselves as citizens of that country, but they frequently retain a sense of pride and identification in the tradition and language of their ancestors. “When it comes to consumer behavior, this ancestral pride is manifested most strongly in the consumption of ethnic foods, in travel to homeland, and in the purchase of numerous cultural artifacts (ethnic clothing, art, music, foreign-language newspapers).”² One’s interest in ethnic goods and services expands rapidly, as one tends to better understand and associates with his ethnic origin. In the UK, for example, there are many Bangladeshi immigrants who have now become British citizens, but they display consumption behavior in many occasions that resembles with that of someone living here in Bangladesh. They buy and use Bangladeshi foods, wear ‘lungi’ and ‘sharee’ and go to mosques on Fridays. This could be a glaring example of how ethnic subculture affects consumer behavior.

Functions Served by Ethnic Subcultures

Milton M. Gordon in his “The Sub-society and the Subculture” mentioned three functions that an ethnic subculture may serve. They are:

- Ethnic subculture provides a psychological source of group identification. An individual gains a sense of identity as he interacts with other members of the same ethnic group. The interaction increases intimacy among the members and they feel good to identify themselves with a distinct group.
- It also offers a patterned network of groups and organizations, and a member of the said subculture may maintain cordial and intimate relationship with other members as long as he wishes.
- An individual migrating to a new culture may find it difficult to understand many aspects of that culture. Here the ethnic subculture to which he belongs may help him to view the new culture by providing him a guideline on the new culture.

Ethnic subculture provides a psychological source of group identification.

Each of the ethnic subculture has unique traditions and behaviors that have potential influence on product preferences and consumption behavior. A particular market consisting of ethnic subcultures may be the focus of a marketer. But, it is not very easy to reach effectively a particular ethnic subculture with a particular type of product. The reason is that not everyone in the same ethnic subculture will consume the same

² *Ibid, Page: 441.*

type of product, nor will lead the same lifestyle. A Bangladeshi, for example, migrated to US from district (region) 'X' will not have the same food habit as one migrated to the same country from district (region) 'Y' from Bangladesh. It means that, to be effective, marketers should further study ethnic subcultures on the basis of demographic and other aspects. Based on the results of such study, the same ethnic market may be further segmented and different offers should be made for different subsegments.

Religious Subculture

An individual's religious affiliation influences to a great extent his consumption pattern.

An individual's religious affiliation influences to a great extent his consumption pattern. Those who belong to a particular religion may buy/not buy and use/not use certain goods and services. Members of a particular religion constitute what we call religious subculture. Religious beliefs and rituals may dictate the use of certain items and may discourage the consumption of others. Muslims for example, buy and consume certain specific food items heavily during the month of 'Ramadan' and buy lot of gifts during the 'Eid-Ul-Fitr'. Again, Islam discourages its followers the consumption of certain items such as alcoholic beverages, pork etc.

It is expected that members of a particular religious subculture will display similar behavioral patterns in their purchases and consumption. But, differences may be found among the members of a particular religious subculture in terms of their consumption and life style. A devout member of 'Islam' may consider it immoral to be materialistic, where another member of the same religion may find nothing wrong in becoming materialistic. A marketer of cine-magazine will have no problem in reaching the later person, where it will be almost impossible for him to penetrate the market consisting of people of the other mentality and religious beliefs.

Regional Subculture

The way people lead their lifestyles may also vary according to where they live or from which part of the country they have moved to the other part of the country. People from a particular part of the country or people living in a particular part constitute what we call regional or geographic subculture. On this basis, there could be two different types of regional or geographic subculture. One could be based on geographic region of the country and other could be based on urban, suburban or rural distinction.

“Different geographic regions of the country pose different problems that consumers must solve. The most obvious of these are the climatic conditions. Climatic conditions influence home construction, clothing requirements, and recreational opportunities to name but a few. In addition, different regions of the country have different age distributions and different social histories. These variables in combination with the climatic variables have produced differing values and lifestyles which newcomers to a region generally acquire after a period of time. These

regional variations influence the use of particular media, the types of products used, and the product attributes considered important.”³ Differences in region influence the type of products used as well the way they are produced and used. Bangladeshis, for example, living in the hill districts display different patterns in food consumption, housing, and recreation than those of the people living in the other parts of the country. The people of Chittagong region of Bangladesh prefer hot and spicy food, where people of the other parts may not like hot food. Again, fish is consumed by everybody here in Bangladesh, but dry fish is consumed heavily by people living in the southern and coastal areas of Bangladesh. These are some of the glaring examples of regional subcultural influences on consumer behaviors.

Regional subcultures clearly influence many aspects of consumer behavior. The consumption process also is influenced by the urban, suburban, and rural distinctions, another type of regional subculture. The urban, and suburban people, for example, prefer ready or instant food, prefer eating out, and enjoy their leisure in a way different from rural people.

Subculture Based on Age

Subcultures may also be based on the age differences of people living in the same country and belonging to the same main culture. It is likely that those who belong to the teen age group will behave quite differently than those of middle age or elderly. Because the outlooks, experiences, attitudes and other aspects vary among people of different age groups, their consumption patterns are likely to vary. The teen-agers are likely to be influenced more by popular heroes and heroines and will display more materialistic life styles. The youth market is a significant subculture for the marketer. It is important to marketers not only because it is lucrative, but also because many consumption patterns held throughout life are formed at this time. The youth, as they start their career in this age are flaunt with more luxury items. Since they have little obligation at this age, they can spend whatever they are. Their consumption patterns lean toward personal care and luxury items. The middle aged group, on the contrary, are matured, worried about the future and careful in making purchase decisions. As an attempt to build a reserve for the future, they are likely to be conservative in buying many material goods, and are found to spend money on protective investments.

The elderly people display quite different consumption behaviors with that of teen-agers and middle aged people. The elderly subculture consists of people who have gone on retirements or whose regular income generating activities have ceased. They have got some special characteristics. Most

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³ Hawkins D.L., Best R.J., and Coney K.A., *Consumer Behavior - Implications for Marketing Strategy*, Business Publications, Inc., Texas, 1983, p. 162.

of them live with their children; their health conditions gradually deteriorate; have emotional difficulties; have minimum amount of money at hands to spend; are price/value conscious; are deal prone; like to shop as it has special meaning; are tuned in to the mass media; and read direct mail, package labels, and package inserts. These few characteristics make them behave quite differently than other groups. Because of their differences with other groups, they also require different types of products.

The elderly people prefer comparison shopping.

The elderly people, because of deteriorating health, will require more fat free foods, tonic items, medical advices and medication as well as hospitalization. Since they have limited incomes, they prefer comparison shopping. Because of their maturity and different attitudes, they are skeptical of advertising claims and are influenced more by the informed sources. The emergence of elderly market has created a need for many different types of products such as old people's home, health clubs and a number of other products and services.

Marketers face lot of problems and challenges in reaching elderly market. The communication strategy, particularly formulated to reach elderly market should be well thought. "One major reason that old people are seldom addressed directly in advertising is that they resent being depicted as old. A baby-food manufacturer, recognizing that elderly individuals were eating the product because of dental problems, introduced a new line of senior foods. This nearly proved disastrous because older people preferred to claim that they were buying baby food for their grandchildren. ... People dislike to admit to themselves or others that they are no longer young. The most successful communications are those that show a mixture of age groups using the product."⁴ Smart marketers have been attuned to the needs of elderly consumers and have been quickest to realize their value as customers.

Singles Subculture

The singles subculture consists of unmarried individuals. This subculture is found to be increasing particularly in the urban and semi-urban areas. The size of this subculture is gradually becoming prominent to call a special marketing attention. Quite a few reasons are associated with the growing size of the subculture of the singles. They could be delaying marriage; postponement of marriage; higher divorce rates; inability to find a suitable source of earning to bear family expenditures and so on. The singles have some special needs, which cannot be met through normal social interaction. Marketers who can recognize their specific needs and can develop products aimed at meeting those specific needs can reap a considerable benefit. Singles night clubs, exotic telephone talk services,

⁴ Berkman H. W. and Gilson C. C., *Consumer Behavior - Concepts and Strategies*, Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc. 1978, p.134

dating services, artificial sexual organs, bachelors' hostels/mess, product that promise sex appeals, convenience foods, restaurants, sports equipment, etc., could be some of the examples of products and services aimed at the subculture of singles. In a country like ours, the singles subculture is growing prominent in the urban areas, and as a result lot of hostels for both males and females have been established aiming to provide accommodation services to singles.

Subculture Based on Gender Difference

Subculture may also be formed based on gender difference, such as subculture of males and subculture of females. Since every society emphasizes distinct, specific roles for men and women, they are likely to behave differently. As their behaviors vary, they consume different types of products and respond differently to marketing appeals. Men for example, are influenced more by aggressiveness, competitiveness, independence, self-confidence, and masculinity. Women on the otherhand, are influenced by neatness, gentleness, tactfulness, talkativeness, and femininity. There are products which are equally used by men and women. But, different appeals in the same product are needed for these two groups. Cosmetics, perfumes, clothing, bicycles etc., are used both by men and women. But, you know that different designs, colors, sizes, shapes, and fragrances are provided for by the marketers to appeal people of different sex. Bicycle, for example, is designed differently for men and women. Even promotional appeals are made different for these two groups. Again, among the females, those who are professionals, behave differently than those of non-professionals/housewives. The working women, particularly those, who are married, will again require different types of products and services that may not be bought by unmarried working women. The shopping patterns of these two groups will also vary. Since characteristics, attitudes, and needs vary between these two groups they may be considered as two different market segments.

Subculture may also be formed based on gender difference.

Occupational Subculture

People display different patterns of purchase behaviors according to their occupational involvement. People of different occupations may constitute occupational subcultures, such as subculture of the doctors, subculture of the lawyers, subculture of the teachers, subculture of the engineers, subculture of the defense personnel. A defense officer, for example, will show different purchase behavior than someone belonging to the civilians' society. Doctors' for example, may look at the nutritional aspect while buying a food item. Marketers should recognize the differences in attitudes and behaviors among people of different occupations and formulate marketing strategies accordingly to be successful in each specific subculture.

Subculture Based on Social Class

Social class may also be used as a determinant of subcultural differences. There could be subculture of the well-offs, subculture of the middle class,

Social class may also be used as a determinant of subcultural differences.

and subculture of the poverty. People belonging to the subculture of the rich will display altogether different buying behavior than those of middle class and poors. Rich will be very selective in their purchases; people of the middle class will have substantial control over their consumption decisions; poors on the otherhand will be very careful and cautious in taking their purchase decisions. The subculture of poverty consists of people living below the poverty line. Because of their low incomes, they will avoid buying pre-packed, instant, frozen food items as they are likely to be costlier than the fresh staple ones. As they have limited educational opportunities, they develop different attitudes, outlooks, and motivation resulting in different buying behaviors on the part of them. Most of their incomes are spent on basic necessities such as food, and housing. Only a small amount of their incomes are spent on clothing, transportation, recreation, and luxury. They basically look at low-cost items, favor shops where they get credit, and are attracted by different inducements offered by the marketers.

Subcultural Differences Affecting Marketing Decisions

Because of the important differences within any culture, marketers must be aware of diverse subcultures -examining them individually and on their own terms. We know that, those identified with a subculture tend to think and act alike in certain respects, and this has important implications for their lifestyle. Recognition of this has led to experimentation with market segmentation as a means of developing effective marketing strategy adapted to market targets that are believed to have special promise. Marketers must recognize that even though their operations are confined to a particular country, or a division or district, or even to one city, subcultural differences may dictate considerable variations in what, how, and when people buy. To deal with these differences effectively, marketers may have to alter their product, distribution systems, price, or promotion to satisfy members of particular subcultures.

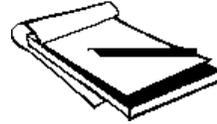
A particular subculture takes on importance in marketing if it constitutes a significant part of the population and specific purchasing patterns can be identified with it. Marketers should also keep in mind that, in reality, subculture is not a sufficient basis for market segmentation. They need to be aware of how subcultural characteristics influence buying behavior. Moreover, they should also bear in mind that one subcultural background may interact with other aspects such as social class, personality, life-style and so on during the buying decision process. Marketers should be interested in subcultures to the extent that they can serve their unique needs. Marketers should understand that, if the members of a subculture, no matter how distinct from the dominant culture, do not differ in their needs and behaviors associated with a particular product area, the subculture does not require recognition as a separate group. Understanding subcultures help marketers to focus on sizeable and natural

market segments. Marketers should also keep in mind that, like culture, subcultures also change. Therefore, continuous monitoring of subcultural characteristics may help marketers bring appropriate and timely changes in their marketing strategies to make them more market oriented.

Activity:

Interview four members of one of the following subcultures. Identify the major ways, if any, that their consumption-related behaviors are unique because of their membership in that subcultural group.

1. Occupational subculture
2. Singles subculture
3. Subculture based on Age



Self Evaluation

Objective Questions

1. Each subculture, like a larger culture, has distinctive –
 - a. Values
 - b. Beliefs
 - c. Attitudes
 - d. All of the above.

2. Marketers are interested in identifying any subculture –
 - a. As a potential market for their products
 - b. As a potential competitive weapon
 - c. Both b & c
 - d. None of the above.

3. The advertising of many products in a local newspaper like “Dainik Azadi” published from Chittagong, is an illustration of selling to –
 - a. Lifestyle
 - b. Subculture
 - c. Culture
 - d. None of the above.

4. Which of the following could be a demographic variable used to analyze subculture?
 - a. Age and occupation
 - b. Income and race
 - c. Religion
 - d. All of the above.

5. Which of the following could be a variable used to segment a culture?
 - a. Income
 - b. Religion
 - c. Region and occupation
 - d. All of the above.

6. Subculture may be said to form around –
 - a. The common needs of a social class
 - b. The common problems of a social class
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. None of the above.

7. Subculture may be defined as groups that share the values and artifacts of the larger society, but also have-
 - a. Distinctive practices
 - b. Distinctive preferences
 - c. Distinctive beliefs
 - d. All of the above.

8. Subculture may also be defined in terms of such factors as –
 - a. Region, rural or urban residence
 - b. Ethnic background
 - c. Religion
 - d. All of the above.

9. Members of a subcultural group must share behaviors –
 - a. That differ from those of the larger or dominant culture of a country
 - b. That match with those of the larger or dominant culture of a country
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. None of the above.

10. The cultural profile of a society or nation is a composite of which of the distinct element?
 - a. The unique beliefs, values, and customs subscribed to by members of specific subcultures
 - b. The central or core cultural themes that are shared by most of the population, regardless of specific subcultural membership
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. None of the above.

11. The ethnic subculture is based on –
 - a. The nationality of one's parents
 - b. The nationality of one's ancestors
 - c. The nationality of the individual
 - d. None of the above.

12. One's interest in ethnic goods and services expands rapidly as one –
 - a. Tends to better understand his ethnic origin
 - b. Tends to better associates with his ethnic origin
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. None of the above.

13. Which of following is a function served by the ethnic subculture?
 - a. Providing a psychological source of group identification
 - b. Offering a patterned network of groups and organizations
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. None of the above.

14. Religious beliefs and rituals may –
- Dictate the use of certain items
 - May discourage the consumption of certain items
 - Both a & b
 - None of the above.
15. Regional subculture is constituted of –
- People from a particular part of the country
 - People living in a particular part of the country
 - Both a & b
 - None of the above.
16. The teen-agers are likely to be influenced more by-
- Popular heroes and heroines
 - Elderly
 - Both a & b
 - None of the above.
17. Which of the following could be a reason for the growing size of the singles subculture?
- Delaying marriage
 - Postponement of marriage
 - Higher divorce rates
 - All of the above.

Answers:



1. d, 2. a, 3. b, 4. d, 5. d, 6. c, 7. d, 8. d, 9. a, 10. c, 11. b, 12. c, 13. c, 14. c, 15. c, 16. a, 17. d.

Descriptive Questions

- Define subculture. Describe the subcultural context of consumer behavior.
- What are the different types of subcultures?
Show how different subcultures affect buying behavior.
Explain how you will use the concept of subculture for marketing decision making.