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January 2011

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/28177/>

MPRA Paper No. 28177, posted 18 Jan 2011 20:13 UTC

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Abstract

The impact of group norms on forming consumer behaviour is an important attribute of man's social life. The market segmentation principles acknowledge the presence of this phenomenon. People belong to different age group, professional status, income levels, educational status etc. are seemed to display some specific consumer behaviour that can be attributed to a particular group. The present study attempts to find the influence of certain selected group norms on consumption pattern.

Key words: Group norms, peer influence, consumer behaviour, culture and consumption, social norms

Introduction

It is quite natural that individual values and beliefs will be carried away by group norms and social behaviour in the natural process of social interaction. The propensity of human being to tend to follow the generally accepted behaviour of a particular group, to which he/she belongs to, creates a collective behaviour. Culture and group norms are interchangeably used in this report. As such formation of group norms or collective practices, which have strong bearing market variables, is ascribed as culture (Hofstede, 1980; Schiffman & Kauk, 2004). Schiffman & Kauk (2004) define culture as the sum total of learned beliefs, values, and customs that serve to direct the consumer behaviour of members of a particular society. Culture is what defines a human community, its individuals and social organization. In line with this, Hofstede (1980) defines culture as "the collective mental programming of the people in an environment. Culture is not a characteristic of individuals; it encompasses a number of people who were conditioned by the same education and life experience." It is nothing but manmade way of setting certain behavioural pattern. An accepted concept about culture is that includes a set of learned beliefs, values, attitudes, habits and forms of

behaviour that are shared by a society and are transmitted from generation to generation within that society. As an all encompassing name, culture implies behaviour, beliefs, value, habits, tradition and heritage of a society.

Understanding the significance of culture as an initiator of buying is an important aspect in the study of consumer behaviour. Culture cannot be separated from an individual; it is not a system of abstract values that exist independently of individuals. Every group or society has a culture, and culture and cultural influences on buying behaviour may vary greatly from country to country. Hence marketers have to be familiar with intricacies of culture scenario of target market for an effective marketing. The success of marketing depends upon the very principle of market segmentation. In this regard subculture is also significant in understanding the target market. Each culture has smaller subcultures or groups of people with shared value systems based on common life experiences and situations. Subcultures include nationalities, religions, racial groups and geographic regions. Many subcultures make up important market segments and marketers often design products and marketing programs tailored to their needs (Kotler & Armstrong, 2008).

Society's values may change continuously even though the core values are relatively permanent. Marketers must pay special attention to values in transition because they affect the size of market segments. Changes in a society's values can be forecasted on the basis of a life-cycle explanation, meaning that an individual's grow older, their values change. When today's young people grow old, they will retain the values of their youth and replace societal values of today's older consumers. Society's values change continuously even though the core values are relatively permanent. Marketers must pay special attention to values in transition because they affect the size of market segments. Changes in a society's values can be forecasted on the basis of a life-cycle explanation, meaning that an individual's grow older, their perceptions may change.

The impact of culture is so natural and self-regulating that its influence on behaviour is taken for granted. For instance, when consumer researchers ask people why they do certain things, they frequently answer 'because it is a right thing to do.' This seemingly superficial response partially reflects the deep-seated influence of culture on consumer behaviour displaying the normative essence of culture in consumer decision making. The present study was organised around the popular idea of Blackwell, Miniard & Engel (2001), which runs as "each individual perceives the world through his own

cultural lens.” From this statement it is very clear that the role of culture on households’ decision making need not be emphasised. The presented study attempted to understand how far the group norms (culture) influence the buying decisions of multi-cultural consumer demographics in the Middle East focussing on the UAE, Kingdom of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology in line with survey research. A total number of 160 respondents were contacted on judgemental basis. Fully structured close-ended questionnaire was developed and administered to the prospective respondents for collecting information pertaining to their demographic profile and shopping behaviour. The demographic factors such as gender, age, nationality, level of education, employment status and level of income are identified as the basis of forming various groups. These six variables were considered as independent factors. Consumer behaviour implies how consumer responds to a particular shopping situation or market variable. The present study identified five factors such as price, brand, usefulness of purchase, shopping convenience and discount and offers that collectively constitute consumer behaviour. Predictive statistics was used to determine how far the demographic factors influence the shopping behaviour with their predictive power.

The model set of multiple regression analysis is as follows:

$$Y = a + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + b_3X_3 + \dots + b_nX_n + \varepsilon$$

where;

Y= dependent variable

a = constant (intercept term)

b_i = regression coefficient

X_i = independent variables

ε = standard error

Cronbach alpha was used to test the data sufficiency and reliability for conducting a particular statistical test. If the Cronbach alpha is more than 0.7, the data available deemed sufficient to do a particular statistical treatment and hence the result is reliable.

The Likert scale was used to analyse qualitative responses based on attitudinal perception. It is a scaling method which is used to measure the responses of the given

statements in the questionnaire. One group of questions for Likert scale analyses has five options and they were coded as follow: Highly agree = 5, Agree = 4, Disagree = 3 and Strongly disagree= 2 and I don't know= 1.

Review of Literature

The impact of culture is so natural and automatic that, its influence on behaviour is usually taken for granted. Culture exists to satisfy the needs of the people within a society. Culture is communicated to members of society through a common language and through commonly shared symbols.

According to Swidler (1986) cultural influences action by not only providing the ultimate values towards which action is oriented, but also by shaping and developing habits, skills and styles. The theory of values survives due to the sensitive possibility in our own culture of the assumption that all actions are governed by schema. It shapes action by defining the requirements of the people. A focus on cultural values was attractive. A settled period refers to culture independently influences action by providing resources from which people can construct diverse lines of action and unsettled cultural period refers to explicit ideologies which directly governs action.

Han and Shavitt (1994) state that individualism and collectivism is the most basic dimensions of cultural variability identified in the cross cultural research. The study conducted two experiments to examine whether the core dimensions of cultural variability is reflected in the types of persuasive appeal by comparing two countries United States an individualistic country and Korea a collectivistic country. The first experiment shows that magazine advertisement in Unites States appeal to individual benefits and preferences than the advertisements in Korea and the Korean advertisement appeals in-group benefits, harmony and family integrity to greater extent than US ads. In the second stage controlled experiments conducted in the two countries discloses that advertisements emphasizing individualistic benefits are more persuasive and advertisement emphasizing family and in-group benefits are less persuasive than those were in Korea. The authors conclude that individualism and collectivism is reflected in the content of advertising in different culture.

Aaker and Maheswaran (1997) point out individualism and collectivism is the most central dimensions of cultural variability identified in cross cultural perspective, western and non-western. The research attempts to assess the cross cultural

generalizability of the persuasion effects predicted by dual process models. The research supports the view that perceptual differences in cue lists the systematic differences across culture. The study conducted two experiments Elaboration Likelihood Model and Heuristic Systematic Model to compare the two different cultures mentioned above. These models were proved effective in predicting and explaining persuasion effects across cultures. The findings suggest that cultural orientation may influence how people process information and subsequent attitude formation and change. The research points out there are several cultural differences in forming consumer behaviour. The authors conclude the attitudes towards differentiation and uniqueness tend to be more favourable for individualists whereas attitudes for building relationship and maintaining connections tend to be more favourable for collectivist.

Luna and Gupta (2001) describe culture and consumer behaviour on the basis of two approaches: Etic and Emic approaches. Etic approach is defined as the comparison of one culture with another whereas Emic approach to culture do not intend to directly compare two or more differing cultures but focuses on the issues of the subjects being studied. In a controlled experiment the authors found that both individualists and collectivist consumers use brands for self-expressive purposes. They use brands, however in different ways: collectivist consumers use brands to reassert their similarity with members of their reference group, while individualist consumers use brands to differentiate themselves from others. The study underscores that culture influences behaviour through its manifestations such as values, rituals and symbols and with varied manifestations of culture, the consumer psychology invariably change.

Rawwas (2001) states the primary objective of marketers is to satisfy the culturally learned needs of the targeted customers especially in a foreign market. The article points out the marketers must understand the customs, habits and inherent ethical differences of their customers before marketing their products in the foreign country. In this research the author selected eight countries that represent The author concludes that a marketing strategy dealing with consumer ethics must be established in a manner that satisfies the cultural expectations of the customers. Therefore marketers who voluntarily follow the ethics and morality are more likely to maintain a loyal consumer following.

Triandis and Suh (2002) explain how culture influences the development of personalities. The authors point out that behaviour is not just developed because of culture and personality but also the interaction between the personality and situation. Different people understand culture differently like say the events, the festivals each individual is having differ from culture to culture. Culture is transmitted to language which helps in communication through common language who live in some state, country etc. The authors also bring out various dimensions of culture like tightness, complexity, collectivism and individualism. The authors have used the Big Five model. The researchers identified the dimensions of socialization that are related to cultural syndromes such as the emphasis on child independence found on individualist culture and the emphasis on dependence found in collectivist cultures.

Blackwell *et al.* (2001) explain how culture affects the need, search and alternative evaluation stages how individuals makes purchase decisions. The authors state that although marketers can influence these stages through advertising and retailing strategic certain cultural factors are difficult to overcome. The authors view point of how consumer consumes a product is that consumers buy products to obtain function, forms and meaning, all of which marketers must address since they are defined by the cultural context of consumption. Rather, the great issue about consumer culture is the way in which it connects up central question about how one should or wants to live and does so at the level of everyday life. Therefore we conclude that culture does influence the behaviour of consumers.

Oyserman et al. (2002) highlight the limitations of individualism–collectivism model of consumer behaviour. The authors explain that cultural psychology's goal is to identify cultural contingencies that moderate individuals thought and behaviour and not to provide a rich description of a specific culture. They point out that individualism and collectivism do not replace the study of culture. The authors concluded that individualism and collectivism are often used to explain almost any culture or cross-cultural differences and it is not useful to tie individualism and collectivism too closely to particular, opposing or articulated value systems.

Soares, Farhangmehr & Shoham (2007) examine different approaches to conceptualising and operationalizing culture in marketing studies. The authors discusses the advantage of using culture dimensions and uses a three-step approach to operationalize culture including nationality, Hofstede cultural dimensions and

measuring culture at individual level. According to the authors “Culture constitutes the broadest influence on many dimensions of human behaviour. This pervasiveness makes defining culture difficult. This difficulty hampers research about the influence of culture on international consumer behaviour.” The authors conclude that using a few dimensions does not provide a complete description of cross-cultural differences however Hofstede’s framework provides a simple and usable shortcut to the integration of culture into studies and measuring these dimensions at the individual level constitute an important contribution to cross-culture research.

Analysis of Data

Culture is viewed as an environmental influence on consumer behaviour. Culture is an important component of what shapes human experience throughout life. Consumers have different attitudes to various products of different countries. The purpose of this study was to find out the consumers attitude about foreign products and how much consumers are influenced with their own culture.

Demographic profile of the respondent

The demographic profile taken for the analysis comprises of gender, age, nationality, level of education, professional status and the income level (refer appendix table 1). The personal information of the respondents is correlated and regressed to variables for predicting or inferring the general purchasing behaviour. More than half of the respondents contacted, in the survey, were males (71%). Gender, being one of the prominent variables of culture, can explain the reasons for varied preferences of men and women.

Age has been identified as another factor constituting culture. Purchase behaviour and consumption pattern may change with respect to different age strata. The analysis of the age structure of the respondents shows that majority of them were in the age group of 35 - 45 years (35%). The general observation of the data structure shows that around 55% belong to above 35 years. The average age estimated as 37.25 years with SD as 13.11. This signifies high variability of age distribution among the respondents. The data tendency from mean and standard deviation shows that more than 68% of the respondents are in the age group of 24 - 50 (mean \pm) Since the majority of the respondents belong to upper age category there may be possibility of sustainable cultural practices.

Nationality profile of the respondents shows that 51% were Indians, 21 % were Middle East, 11% were European and the rest 18% were people belonging to different countries such as Sri Lanka, Philippines, Pakistanis etc. With respect to the level of education majority of the respondent comes under the category of graduate were 60% whereas those who are qualified as post graduate are about 24% followed by 15% being higher secondary and 1 % having completed their secondary level. This show most of respondents were highly qualified and this helped us to understand culture better. The employment status of the respondents was also identified as an element of culture. Knowledge regarding the professional status of the respondents will help to identify the pattern of cultural formation through peer and colleague influence. The data show that maximum number of respondents falls in the category of professional, which was 56%. Next highest category is skilled workers, which constitutes 25% of the data. Almost 6% of the respondents were unemployed and the same proportion is identified for the respondent, who have own-business and the remaining 8 % are covered by students.

The level of income is an important determinant for purchasing a product. As a general perception consumers with higher income are willing to spend more and lesser income level spends less. Among the 160 respondent, 35% of the respondent were with the income level up to BHD 250 (BHD 1 = USD 2.65 approximate) followed by 27% were in the category of BHD 250-500 out of the remaining 15 % and 14 % were under the category of BHD 500-750 and BHD 750-1000 respectively. The least respondents fall was in the category of above BHD 1000 The average income estimated was BHD 473.43 with SD as 353.93. This signifies high variability of income level among the respondents. The data tendency from mean and standard deviation shows that more than 68% of the respondents are in the income level of BHD 120 – 825 (mean \pm).

Influence of Group norms on buying behaviour

In this section various factors influencing buying behaviour are studied and correlated and regressed with the demographic profile of the respondent such as age, gender, nationality, level of education, employment status and income level. This helps us to understand how different demographic factors affect the buying the buying patterns of the respondents.

Even though price is considered to be the most important determinants of demand for a commodity, the results of the study give a moderate priority to price. It is clear from the result that only 19% of the respondents underline price as a high priority variable. Price may lose its significance when other factors like brand loyalty, level of income, fashionable nature of the customers etc become prominent. When this response is examined together with the same response against discount and offers it seems to be a little bit strange. The proportion of the respondents who assigned top priority to discounts and offers (24%) is higher than that of the proportion of customers (19%) who assigned top priority to price of the products. Its quiet natural, consumers as a group leaves no opportunity to grab discounts and offers even though they are not much price sensitive. From the above figure, 19% of the respondents gave high priority to the price of the product and 27% of the respondents gave high preference for brand name which provides almost equivalent satisfaction and usefulness to them. Respondents give least preference to the shopping convenience (48%) as they look in for what they purchase and not for the place of shopping. The proportion of the respondents who are on the both extremes is similar with respect to discounts/offers, expressing top priority and least priority equi-proportionally (24%)

All the five variables discussed above (elements of consumer behaviour) were regressed with the elements of culture discussed above. The predictors identified as age (AGE), gender (GEN), Nationality (NAT), level of education (EDN), employment status (PROF) and monthly household income (INC). The dependent variables together constitutes the general consumer behaviour, are the price of the product, brand name, usefulness of the commodity, shopping convenience and discounts and offers. The summary of regression analysis for each factor of consumer behaviour is presented here.

$$\text{PRICE} = 1.708 + -0.054 \text{ AGE} + -0.311 \text{ GEN} + 0.089 \text{ NAT} + 0.205 \text{ EDN} + -0.004 \text{ PROF} + 0.183 \text{ INC}$$

Among the determinants of the price, the prominent variable is observed as income (the 't' value being 2.825), and the result is significant being 'p' value 0.005.

The second most prominent variable is identified as the level of education in determining the price (the 't' value being 1.874), and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.063.

The least prominent variable among the two is identified as employment in determining the price (the 't' value being 0.072), and the test is not found significant, being 'p' value 0.943.

$$\text{BRAND} = 2.286 + 0.078 \text{ AGE} + -0.173 \text{ GEN} + -0.006 \text{ NAT} + 0.0192 \text{ EDN} + 0.0197 \text{ PROF} + 0.331 \text{ INC}$$

The first most prominent variable is identified as income (the 't' value being 3.791) and the test is significant being 'p' value 0.000 .

The second most prominent variable is observed as employment (the 't' value being 2.389) and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.018 .

The least prominent variable is determined as nationality (the 't' value being 0.068) and the test is not significant being 'p' value 0.946 .

$$\text{USEFULNESS} = 1.382 + 0.098 \text{ AGE} + 0.092 \text{ GEN} + 0.006 \text{ NAT} + 0.174 \text{ EDN} + 0.167 \text{ PROF} + -0.059 \text{ INC}$$

The first preferred prominent variable is observed as employment (the 't' value being 1.936) and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.055 .

The second most prominent variable is observed as level of education (the 't' value being 1.120) and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.264 .

The least prominent variable is identified as nationality (the 't' value being 0.067), and the result is proved to be insignificant being 'p' value 0.947 .

$$\text{SHOPPING CONVENIENCE} = 4.466 + -0.017 \text{ AGE} + 0.091 \text{ GEN} + 0.020 \text{ NAT} + 0.0153 \text{ EDN} + 0.0920 \text{ PROF} + -0.0655 \text{ INC}$$

The first most prominent variable is observed as employment (the 't' value being 1.294), and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.198.

The second most prominent variable is observed as level of education (the 't' value being 1.205), and the result is not significant being 'p' value 0.230 .

The least prominent variable is observed as age group (the 't' value being 0.205), and the result is proved to be insignificant being 'p' value 0.838 .

$$\text{DISCOUNTS AND OFFERS} = 5.912 + -0.124 \text{ AGE} + 0.285 \text{ GEN} + -0.057 \text{ NAT} + -408 \text{ EDN} + -0.476 \text{ PROF} + 0.251 \text{ INC}$$

The first most preferred variable is identified as employment (the 't' value being 5.810), and the result is significant being 'p' value 0.000 .

The second most preferred variable is identified as level of education (the 't' value being 3.177), and the result is significant being 'p' value 0.002 .

The least most preferred variable is identified as nationality (the 't' value being 0.627), and the result is proved to be insignificant being 'p' value 0.532 .

Multiple regression analysis was carried out to understand the nature and magnitude of impact of changes in elements of culture (demographic variable) on the various factors of consumer behaviour. It has been observed from the analysis that employment is the most prominent factor impacting cultural attributes. Second to employment, income is a crucial factor in configuring the cultural attributes. The prominent position of employment, in formulating consumer behaviour, emphasis effectiveness of peer/colleagues influence in modifying consumer behaviour.

With respect of impact of income on price, it is interesting to see that the findings of the study are consistent to the common micro economics knowledge. The study could also find that higher income earners are ready to pay higher price. Higher income consumers are more brand conscious and are willing to spend more for expensive products. It was also found that the employment status and educational level of the respondents influences the product usefulness, shopping convenience and discounts and offer. This shows that respondents purchase products based on their knowledge and understanding of the product. Similarly they also look for discounts and offers for the products.

Even though the purchase is effected by an individual consumer, the people around him/her may have strong influence in decision making. The present study identified four of such influences and attempted to know which, are the prominent factors influencing consumer behaviour.

Since price is understood to be the primary factor influencing demand for a commodity or service, the study attempted to disclose the propensity of checking the MRP on the product. The analysis shows that, around 63% of the respondents check MRP before buying a product. This shows us that most of the people are very price conscious and purchase according to their budget. Around 14% of the respondent does not check the MRP. It was attempted to understand whether the demographic factors have any

influence on the habit of verifying maximum retail price (MRP) during the process of purchase. Regression analysis was conducted by taking demographic factors as independent variables (predictors) and the habit of verifying MRP as dependent variable. The summary of analytical result is presented below.

$$\text{MRP} = 0.698 + - 0.084 \text{ AGE} + 0.660 \text{ GEN} + 0.049 \text{ NAT} + 0.147 \text{ EDU} + 0.200 \text{ PROF} \\ + -0.076 \text{ INC}$$

The most influential factor is observed as gender (the 't' value being 3.559), and the result is proved to be significant being 'p' value 0.000.

The second most prominent variable was identified as employment (the 't' value being 3.113), and the test is proved to be significant being 'p' value 0.002.

The least prominent variable among the two is identified as nationality (the 't' value being 0.699), and the test is proved to be insignificant being 'p' value 0.486.

The purchase behaviour of the respondents was also explored by developing a composite set of 13 statements. The respondents were asked to record their agreements and disagreements on a 5 points responses scale and these responses were coded as follows: Strongly agree= 5, Agree= 4, Disagree= 3, Strongly disagree= 2, I don't know= 1. The responses were analysed through Likert scale (refer appendix table 2).

The results of the Likert scale analysis showed that the first priority among the behavioural responses is with respect to the quality of the product. From the Likert table is clear that the score against the quality of the product is 4.54, which is near to the maximum score assigned. This shows that the respondents give more importance to the quality of the product and they prefer going to shops that have good salespeople who provides information of the product to the respondents. It is also observed from the table respondents in general agreed to their preference to visit the shops with more service minded people. It was also found that the most of the respondents are reluctant to replace the existing models when a new one comes. This shows that respondents buys product that can be used for a long time and they do not replace it as and when an alternative available. This signifies the loyalty attributes of the customers. Some people purchase products after reading the specifications on how to use the product. The information printed on the packaging will give clear indication of the purpose and

how to use the product. Product packaging or even attractive packages also doesn't influence a consumer in making purchase decisions.

There are many factors which influence a person when searching for a product. These may vary from person to person and include things like goodwill of the product or brand, price of the product and how the product is going to satisfy his needs. But in this case the least preferred is brand and the most preferred is price. Cronbach alpha measure shows moderate internal consistency of the data, being 0.752 the value.

Conclusion

The present study covered the nationalities that constituted the prominent cultures in Bahrain. The report discussed the various dimensions of culture which affect the buying decisions of consumers. It is assumed in the present study that age group, sex, racial subculture will affect each other. Country and society also have a great influence towards the culture. Subculture also played an important role in deciding the culture dimension of customer. Culture offers directions and guidance for solving human problems by providing methods for satisfying psychological, social and personal needs. It also analyses the trend of the consumer. The study looked in to how an understanding of various cultures of a society helps marketers predict consumer acceptance of their products. The study was able to bring about certain little known facts about the role of culture on consumption. From the findings of our project we came to the conclusion that culture/group norms has a great influence on consumer behaviour.

It was identified that among the many factors constituting culture professional status is consistently the prominent factor forming consumer behaviour followed by income. Buyer characteristics include four major factors: cultural, social, personal, and psychological. A person's buying behaviour is the result of the complex interplay of all these cultural, social, personal, and psychological factors. Age group also plays an important role. In every age group varied response shows that age affects the culture to a great extent. Life style also play an important role a life style varied with the different age group situations. Many of these factors cannot be controlled by marketers, but they are useful in identifying and understanding the consumers that marketers are trying to influence.

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Table.IV.1
Demographic Profile of the Respondents (%) N = 160

Sl.No	Category	Percentage
I	Gender	
	Male	71
	Female	29
II	Age	
	Below 25	15
	25 – 35	21
	35 – 45	35
	45 – 55	24
	Above 55	05
III	Nationality	
	Indian	51
	Middle East	21
	European	11
	Other Asian	18
IV	Level of Education	
	Secondary	01
	Higher Secondary	15
	Graduate	60
	Post Graduate	24
V	Employment	
	Student	08
	Professional	56
	Unemployed	06
	Own Business	06
	Skilled workers	25
VI	Monthly Income (in BHD)	
	≤ 250	35
	250 – 500	27
	500 – 750	15
	750 – 1000	14
	> 1000	09

Table 2: General Purchase Behaviour

Statement	Likert Score	Rank
I am very much particular about quality of the product	4.54	I
I look for services minded people in the shops	4.20	II
I am very much price sensitive	4.13	III
I am very much concerned about shopping convenience	3.98	IV
I prefer packages that are convenient to store and use	3.93	V
I read product specifications before I purchase	3.77	VI
I usually respond immediately to offers and discounts	3.75	VII
I think my consumption pattern has changed since I started interacting with other people.	3.74	VII
I prefer only branded item	3.66	IX
I look for well-wrapped products	3.60	X
Attractive packages influence me	3.51	XI
A product is more valuable to me if it has snob appeal	3.44	XII
I replace existing models when a new one come	3.33	XIII