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Reference Groups: Aspirational and Non-Aspirational Groups in Consumer Behavior

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Abstract

Reference groups are a very important aspect to the study of consumer behavior. In reference groups, the desire to join (aspirational) or to detach from (non-aspirational) a particular reference group can assist in the explanation of why individuals consistently purchase certain products as representations of their identity. Initially, this paper was written for an assignment in a Business Marketing course. It was revised for submission as a Scholarly Note. It is the ability to understand consumer purchase patterns that goes to the heart of the scholarly study of consumer behavior. This paper thus focuses on the concepts of judgmental heuristics, social identity theory, and in-group versus out-group bias in relation to reference groups. The application of these psychological concepts to reference groups can contribute to the explanation for why people think, behave, and have particular motives for purchasing products and interacting with others.

Key Terms:

Reference Groups; Aspirational Groups; Consumer Behavior; Non-Aspirational Groups; Social Identity Theory; Judgmental Heuristics; Bias

Introduction

An individual's decision to purchase a product is often an ordinary task. With a variety of products available varying from ethnic to recreational, the option to purchase a product depends solely on the preference of the individual. However, the decision becomes complex when aspects of representation, visibility, and the perceptions of others are taken into consideration. Reference groups are developed from these considerations. A reference group is a group that one uses as a framework of personal identification or a group one uses to identify and/or classify others. Although this type of group can establish and/or enhance personal identity, it is from the sub-groups of a reference group that the significance offered to individuals is found.

The essence of a reference group then lies within the sub-groups that comprise it, aspirational and non-aspirational groups, and the potential advantages of each. The concept of a reference group is that an individual in a specific group that buys a certain product compares him or herself to other individuals in his or her group (direct membership) as well as individuals in a different group (indirect membership) that buy the same or a different product. This paper will focus on indirect membership groups or aspirational and non-aspirational reference groups primarily because of the extensive volume of the matter. Secondly, this paper will focus on

indirect membership because of its significant relation to the psychological concepts of judgmental heuristics, social identity theory, and in-group versus out-group bias.

In the consumer's world, the importance of reference groups is found in the significant role that the groups can have when an individual establishes a sense of belonging, self-verification, and self-enhancement. The psychological concepts of heuristics, social identity theory, and in-group versus out-group bias influence a person's decision to refer to oneself as part of a group that is larger than the individual. In order to understand the connection between such concepts and the influence of a reference group on an individual, one must understand the nature of reference groups and the sub-groups of aspirational and non-aspirational groups.

Reference Groups

Any categorization of a group is a reference group. In a group, members assess their behavior and characteristics by comparing them to those of another group. In a reference group, individuals are automatically assigned to a sub-group: aspirational or non-aspirational. An aspirational group is a reference group that an individual wishes to join, while a non-aspirational group is a reference group that an individual wishes to detach him or herself from. An individual will be a part of a reference group regardless of awareness of the actual group (Singer, 1990).

In consumer behavior, a reference group can influence an individual's buying preferences. The influence of a reference group on an individual can increase the overall level of conformity within the group. Conformity in aspirational and non-aspirational groups can be seen by contrasting cohesive and non-cohesive groups. Forsyth (2006) expresses that a cohesive group emphasizes particular norms, values agreement, and solidarity more than non-cohesive groups (p. 117). From these components, a cohesive group can tacitly instill conformity on members to maintain a group approved image by purchasing certain products. Persons within a specific reference group often buy products that are sold to their unit because these products are geared to their group. For instance, a young adult associated with a female Hispanic-American reference group will often purchase products marketed to that group. An example of a product marketed to such a group is *Latina* magazine. Though the woman may purchase other publications, she buys the magazine to associate herself with her demographic group. Individuals thus "learn from observing how members of their reference groups consume, and they use the same criteria to make their own consumer decisions" (Lamb, Hair, & McDaniel, 2006, p.170). A reference group then becomes a basic guideline to consumer behavior.

Initially, the group of purchasers one joins is determined by the primary benefit(s) that the group can offer the individual. A person joins a group out of the need to belong, for self-verification, and/or for self-enhancement. Belonging or associating oneself with a group can satisfy the need to be accepted by others. Achieving this initial purpose of group membership can permit successful attribution of group identity both internally and externally. Wade and Brittan-Powell (2000) support this notion by stating, "a collective orientation adds to the self-concept through a sense of belongingness . . . thereby having implications for stability and continuity of identity" (p. 327).

Aspirational Groups

An aspirational group is a reference group that an individual wishes to associate with. It is often the reference group of another individual whom one finds admirable or inspiring. In aspirational groups, there is a significant amount of prestige or notability that an outside individual desires to attribute to his or her identity. For instance, an employee in a business organization finds his six-figure earning co-workers all drive current Lexus or Mercedes Benz vehicles. He, on the other hand, drives a 1995 Volkswagen. He wishes to join his co-workers' group and wants to change his current image in order to attribute the notability of the out-group to himself. Once he can afford a luxury car to attain membership in such a group, he can then become a member of the aspirational group to enhance his self-perceived identity.

In addition to enhancing one's sense of self-worth, a key reason for desiring to associate with an aspirational group is to improve one's image. As Lessig and Park (1978) explain, "What is important is the psychological image associated with the group whether the group is real or imaginary" (p. 42). It is one's desire to be visible and to have others view oneself as a valid member of a group that is imperative to one's satisfaction when attempting to associate with an aspirational group. High proximity with individuals of the aspirational group becomes crucial in order to keep up with the increasingly dynamic lifestyle of a group that one may not be accustomed to living.

A major disadvantage to joining an aspirational group is conformity. An eager desire to be part of a favorable group will not grant membership. Instead, upholding the values, maintaining the image, and purchasing the products of that group are necessary to become a member. If punctuality, eloquence, three-piece-suits, and luxury vehicles are values and products of an aspirational group, adhering to these values may satisfy the requirements of the group, and non-conformity usually entails rejection.

The desire to associate with a reference group can be viewed in the advertising mechanisms that a company utilizes to increase a consumer's desire to purchase a product. Companies often try to influence an individual's opinion by associating a product with an adored figure or quality. For instance, McCarthy & Howard (2003) reported that Michael Jordan would become one of the celebrity faces for the Hanes male underwear line as an "international icon" for the company. After the release of Jordan's advertisements in 2003, Jordan's face associated with the product created a perception of Hanes underwear as high-quality in comparison to similar alternatives. Although the Hanes product was not easily seen when consumers wore it, thus creating low product visibility, Jordan's image for the Hanes company still created an influx of young consumers eager to own the product and associate with the aspirational group. The desire to be part of a group that Jordan endorsed brought forth a group of young men who felt Hanes underwear classified them as selectively unique.

Non-Aspirational Groups

In contrast, a non-aspirational group is a group from which an individual wishes to detach his or her identity. A person in this case views the norms of the out-group as negative in comparison to his or her values. A male adolescent wishing to be accepted by the popular

mainstream teens at school will not consider purchasing clothes from gothic or punk culture stores, such as Hot Topic or R3mnant.com. In order for the adolescent to fit in the desired mainstream aspirational group, the teen will shop at stores such as Demo or Man Alive because of their emphasis on urban fashion, allowing the adolescent to disassociate himself from the non-aspirational group of the gothic or punk teenagers. A significant distance between the individual and the non-aspirational group is essential.

Here, conformity is likely to be seen through an abundant expression of values opposite of the non-aspirational group. Heavy reliance on urban dress and use of urban colloquialism are prime examples of such expression that differentiates mainstream adolescent groups from gothic/punk groups. When trying to remain outside of a non-aspirational group, conformity is observed as a mechanism to maintain satisfaction in one's self-concept and image. Finally, it is from an association with or a detachment from these groups that individuals are able to increase their levels of self-verification and self-enhancement.

Researchers Escalas and Bettman (2003) utilize the concepts of self-verification and self-enhancement as psychological reasons to join an aspirational group (p. 378). Self-verification explains that individuals wish to be understood and have their identities verified by others on the basis of the group(s) they associate with. A consumer desiring a greater sense of self-verification would join a group and purchase particular products that are common to that group in order to have others represent him or her with that type of product and that group. For instance, an adolescent boy who joins a group of consumers who purchase Fender electric guitars wants persons outside of the group to recognize him as a musician. A group that provides one with substantial self-verification enhances one's image. Such a group satisfies Abraham Maslow's esteem and self-actualization needs in his psychological theory of Hierarchical Needs¹. In regards to reference groups, the need to strengthen one's self-esteem via self-verification is due to the context of visibility. Being significantly visible as a member of a positive group will create a stronger sense of internal value and meaning to the person. Following this, a group that provides self-enhancement can upgrade one's image by maximizing an individual's favorable qualities. Such groups assist in "actively creating one's self concept, reinforcing and expressing self-identity, and allowing one to differentiate oneself and assert individuality" (Escalas and Bettman, 2005, p. 378).

When considering consumer behavior, one both asserts and expands one's individuality and may also reshape one's self-concept to fit that of another group. A consumer with a goal of increasing self-enhancement or social status might purchase a specialty product such as a Lamborghini automobile to increase visibility. Purchasing a Lamborghini would allow a person to alter his or her identity to one that may be viewed more favorably by society. Doing this would also allow him or her to be distinguished from the majority who cannot afford such an expensive car. The benefit of self-enhancement in a group is seen in the advantage that it offers its members. A person who acquires self-enhancement from a new group may be seen as an exceptional individual and positively different in comparison to other groups in society.

¹ Lester et. al (1983) state Maslow's concept of Hierarchical Needs as a classification of needs into five categories varying from psychological to self actualization. They support the notion that these needs must be satisfied in order to maintain psychological health.

Through a detailed explanation of reference groups, aspirational groups, and non-aspirational groups, along with an examination of self-verification and self-enhancement, I have offered an initial understanding of consumer behavior. From here, I will explore additional concepts to further explain consumer behavior. There are three significant psychological concepts which assist in the understanding of how individuals purchase merchandise in relation to reference groups: judgmental heuristics, social identity theory, and in-group versus out-group bias. By examining these concepts, one can understand how consumers view groups, how consumers become members of specific groups, and how groups interact with one another.

Judgmental Heuristics in Groups

When examining reference groups, people unconsciously refer to heuristics, specifically judgmental heuristics, which are mental shortcuts people use to make judgments quickly and efficiently (Aronson, 2005). When a person first meets a stranger, he or she automatically categorizes that person. These categories may be demographic, social status, or culturally related. Likewise when a person views a particular group, he or she may unconsciously connect that group with prior encounters with people of that group, what those people are like, and how they interact with others.

In regards to purchasing behavior, judgmental heuristics can be considered mental reference marks to help people quickly analyze and classify products into proper categories. A person may view generic products such as Sam's Choice sold at Wal-Mart as "low class" goods and view specialty products sold at stores like Whole Foods as "upper class" goods. It is from these judgmental heuristics that one can decide which products will be representative of one's identity and which products will not. In the example of the adolescent in school, the adolescent would associate black make-up and dark clothing to the gothic non-aspirational group that he wishes to remain distant from.

Social Identity Theory in Groups

While judgmental heuristics function as a mental shortcut for group categorization, social identity theory helps explain the process by which a group influence can impact an individual. Tajfel and Turner's social identity theory suggests that one's identity is formed in relation to reference groups via three steps: categorization, identification, and comparison (Stets and Burke, 2000). As social identity theory explains, a group member's self-esteem and self-concept can be influenced by the group as the member begins to associate and identify with the group. Understanding the success or failure of group association and identification to an individual's self-concept via steps of categorization, identification, and comparison is essential.

Stets and Burke (2000) state that categorization is important to the formation of an identity (p. 225). During the categorization stage, an individual recognizes the group that he or she wishes to join. This person begins to explore the group for the advantages and disadvantages that membership will bring. If the person decides to join the group, he or she enters the identification stage. During the identification stage, components of the person's identity begin to change in order to reflect that of the "standard group member." He or she begins to significantly

identify with the group not merely by reflecting group characteristics, but by incorporating such characteristics into his or her self-concept. Finally, once he or she achieves this new identity, he or she creates group comparisons to distinguish between an in-group and an out-group.

Social identity theory can be seen in both aspirational and non-aspirational groups in consumer behavior. A female renter is eager to join the group of homeowners of many of her friends. She begins to take classes and reads material regarding home ownership and slowly begins to identify herself as a homeowner. As time passes, she buys a home and becomes a member of the homeowner club. In her new neighborhood, she develops characteristics similar to owners and loses characteristics that once classified her as a renter. She begins to place herself within an in-group of home owners and has separated herself from an out-group of renters.

On the other hand, a person looking to remove him or herself from a group may categorize the members and their qualities as different from him or herself. An ardent consumer of plasma televisions would not compare his taste for televisions to the taste of one who admires LCD screens. Such a person would not progress past the identity stage in Tajfel & Turner's theory and therefore would not achieve the identity of those who admire LCD screens. Instead, he would maintain his initial identity and complete the final two stages of the theory, identification and comparison, based on his aspiration to associate with a plasma television group.

For both aspirational and non-aspirational reference groups, the availability of judgmental heuristics allow for quick categorization as an individual tries to associate or disassociate from a group. Rubin and Hewston (1998) explain that "social identity theory coupled with in-group identification" provide the basis for "inter-group discrimination" (p. 40). This discrimination between groups can produce various outcomes. For instance, a common result of discrimination is the creation of cohesiveness within a group. Most importantly, discrimination has the potential to lead to in-group versus out-group bias.

In-Group Versus Out-Group Bias

In-group and out-group biases are likely to occur when a person has voluntarily identified with a group and has attributed its values to his or her self-concept. A person participating in this type of bias, whether consciously or unconsciously, has the tendency to look more favorably on their group's positive characteristics and minimize negative characteristics. Simon et. al (1990) state that members of an in-group will promote "the deindividuation of the out-group members and thus [have] the tendency to favour the in-group over the out-group" (p. 520). Furthermore, members of the in-group will then maximize the negative characteristics of an outside group while minimizing those that are positive. Members of the in-group will attribute their group's negative characteristics to the environment, while negative characteristics of the out-group are regarded as internal to the group. Such a bias often leads to conflict and disdain between the groups. If observing an aspirational group that encounters a non-aspirational group, a member of the aspirational group (the in-group) would likely find the non-aspirational group (the out-group) to be flawed with qualities that do not exist in their own group.

For instance, a person who claims to be conscious of the harmful effects of sweat shops on workers would want to become a member of a group that supports clothing companies such as American Apparel that do not use such oppressive mechanisms of production. After becoming a member of that aspirational group, a bias would then arise whenever attention is given to the positive contributions of the American Apparel company to the community and the negative contributions of companies that use sweat shops. The member would strive to keep the out-group label from his identity by maximizing the positive qualities of his group and attributing them to himself in order to uphold his membership in the in-group.

Regardless of one's conscious awareness, individuals are constantly in or out of groups and constantly classify others into groups. Whether it is a group one is born into, a group one voluntarily chooses to be in, or a group one avoids being associated with, groups become part of one's identity, and this is especially true when purchasing products. The need to belong and the desire to attain self-enhancement and self-verification are important to success in society. In consumer behavior, via product representation, individuals seek to belong to groups which enhance and verify their image and self-esteem. It is important for one to recognize the impact that reference groups and its sub-groups (aspirational and non-aspirational groups) can have on an individual. As well, the significance of concepts of judgmental heuristics, social identity theory, and in-group out-group bias also play a crucial role in the application of reference groups to one's identity and one's interaction with others. Through reference groups and the application of their representative products, individuals may gain "privileged treatment" in both private and social spheres. Therefore, the process of deciding to join a group parallels an account of how one wants to be viewed and treated not only by group members, but by general society as well.

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