

Full Length Research Paper

Social class is a myth or reality in buying behavior

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This research study explores the significance of social class and its relation with consumers buying behavior. Whether this phenomenon is real or a myth, it is checked by review of literature, which supports that social classes have an impact on consumers buying behavior and it is a reality not myth. Relationship between status, education, occupation and income is examined which in turn cause an effect on social class and depict consumers buying behavior. Based on previous research studies it reveals that social classes are real and consumer's buying behaviors differ according to their position in the society. On the basis of classes people have different buying preferences. Further discussion is made on managerial implications and future research in this area.

Key words: Social class, buying behavior, education, occupation, income, status.

INTRODUCTION

Classes are the hierarchal system form according to ranks in the society. Social class is a real phenomena prevailing in every society on various aspects. This concept is being stereotyped from many years and people did not have much awareness about it. It depicts the social identity of a person in the society. People are subgroup into the society and share believes and values with one another. Groups form in a society on several characteristics. People with common interest combine together and formalize a group. Concept of social class is widespread in everyday dealings of humans because people build and maintain several relationships which are basis of these classes in society (Bian et al., 2005). Consumer behavior consider imperative for the marketers. Behaviors of consumers determine through their actions, purchase decisions and choices. Various consumers depict different types of behaviors while buying. Buying behavior in shopping, fashion, consumption is dependable on the class status. Person act according to the set believes and norms of his/her class. People with more power and possessions are considered as belong to upper class. People from lower class are in striving for achieving higher status. In order to sell products to consumers marketers define their target audience and

identify from class of society they belong to. Behaviors of consumers differ in making purchase (Howard and Sheth, 1969). This reality of social classes bring downfall in the society. Increase dissatisfaction among people because people from lower class consider that powerful people snatch their rights, which in turn have an effect on their buying behavior. Differences between every class lead to different buying behaviors. These classes exist in every society and culture and it shape their lifestyle accordingly (Rich and Jain, 1968) due to which people show various behaviors while shopping.

Three component theory of stratification explain social class from three concepts wealth, prestige and power (Weber, 1978). These three factors determine the social class in every society. People with more wealth, prestige and power belong to upper class and people with low prestige, power and wealth categorized as lower class in the society. In developing countries like in Pakistan people categorize others in different classes mainly on the basis of income and status. According to Marx notion of conflict, it arises due to inequitable division of resources among classes in the society. Middle class is a backbone of every society. People in Pakistan mainly belong to middle and lower class. In the scenario of Pakistani society middle class now diminishes. Objective of this research study is to enlighten the concept of social class and study what determinants contribute in its structure. Also consumer behaviors are examined in society while making purchase decisions because every

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class has its own values and buying patterns. This research contributes in the literature of field of marketing and social sciences as it analyzing the concept of social class in consumers buying behavior. Literature is studied on the classes in the society, its factors which outline it and their mutual impact on the buying patterns of consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Karl Max defines social class as a foundation of relationship building among people. Social ties are the cause of relationships (Bian et al., 2005). People live in a society structure several relationships in network overtime. Community form around different brands (Veloutsou, 2009), friendship relationship, networking relationship (Bian et al., 2005) are some types of relationships prevailing in the society. Inequalities prevail in every society on the basis of different aspects like income (Williams, 2009), occupation (Bian et al., 2005), status (Hurst, 2007) and groups (Storck, 2002). Definitions of social class divide it into sub-category of group of people who have access to resources (Storck, 2002). Social classes are divided into further different categories. Ruling class is the elite classes possess maximum resources and utilize those resources in further collection and protection of their property (Ralf, 1959). By resolving three main issues of discrepancy, social class differences and identification of these classes psychologists can help and assist people (Williams, 2009). Sivadas et al. (1997) divide social class into five categories these are upper, upper-middle, middle, working, and lower class. Social classes are of two types' objective social class and subjective social class. Subjective social class identification is the emotional feeling of a person about his standing in the society in middle, upper or lower class (Islam et al., 2009). Objective social class identification is subdivided into materialistic consumption patterns on the basis of occupation, income, and income (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Social class is not just a name of classification on the basis of race, gender, critical consciousness and income but it categorized on the basis of manners, social and behavioral practices (Turpin). Islam, Wills-Hamilton (2009) examined that income can be important determinant in the happiness of a person; at the same time it also depends on the objective ways of consumption which depicts their higher life style. Status is one of the factors which can be seen in relevance with social class.

It defines the status and rank of individual in existing society. "Status is frequently thought of as the relative rankings of members of each social class in terms of specific status factors for example relative wealth (amount of economic assets), power (the degree of personal choice or influence over others), and prestige

(the degree of recognition received from others) are three status factors frequently used when (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004)." Class and status both formalize the social inequalities. Rather it based on symbolic or materialistic situations of life style of people. Status is important in determination of one's class in society and its consumption patterns (Dominquez and Page, 1981). "Class affects material well-being directly through the kinds of economic assets people bring to market exchanges. Status affects material well-being indirectly, through the ways that categories of social honor underwrite various coercive mechanisms (Wright, 2003)." Social class is now stigmatized with the income, low income people identified themselves as an individual who have their own identity not on the basis of income. They define social class in terms of the identity which they get by understanding there self (Zucchino, 1997). To belong to a low income group is sometime less valuable for the persons and they take it in negative way, which is the reason they do not want to be known associated with this group member (Williams, 2009). Another reason of not believing the social class is that people believe that their current status of low income is for short time duration and they will get higher status and recognition in near future (Bullock and Limbert, 2003).

In three component theory of stratification (Weber, 1978) define class system in three mechanism wealth, prestige and power. Further Hurst (2007) argued that these classifications have an effect not on the area around individuals but also affect the whole community and other areas. According to Marx social classes are structured on the source of conflict, struggle and opposing thoughts of people. Wong et al. (2009) view social class as a source of conflict in welfare societies. In welfare societies class conflicts are low. Wong et al. (2009) divide social class in 5 levels upper class, upper middle class, middle class, lower middle class and lower class. Low income families form strategies to cope up with the conflict (Hamilton, 2009). Marxist model deals with two paths, one is of exploitation of resources and other is capacity of bargain within market exchange (Wright, 2003). Numerous theories come under the Marxist theory one of them is Weberian strategy of class analysis. Classes are also influenced by cultural characteristics (Turpin). Education provides awareness and it can be a source of upward mobility, that increase the status in the society (Bullock and Limbert, 2003) it further provide opportunity for occupation, which also reflect the social class and its status of people (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Social classes also have an effect on college students their learning abilities, social and cultural activities. Students with high class are better able to gain resources and move upward (Stuber, 2009). "In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class.

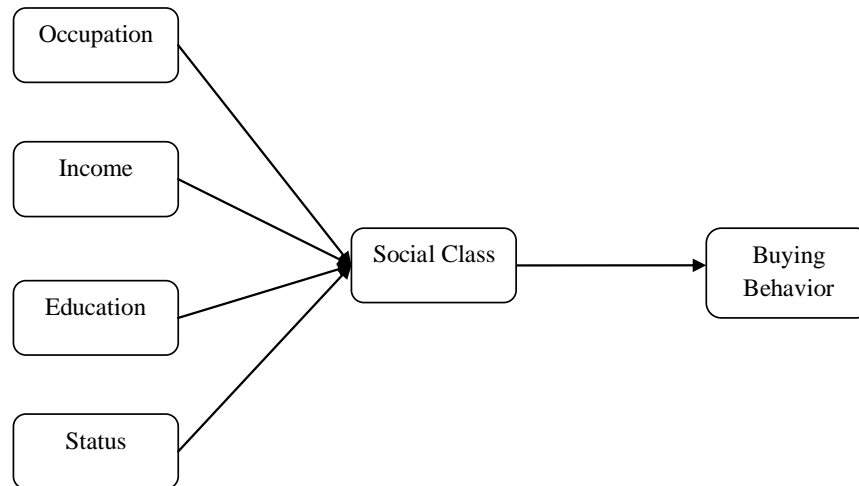


Figure 1. Social class effect on buying behavior.

(Giddens, 1971)" Marxian views the concept of class as attainment of economic resources and their division among different classes. Division of class structure cannot results from status, social standing and evaluation infect classes are one of the part of production process and this phenomena is derive from the concept of relationships made in the production process. "Classes are constituted by the relationship of groupings of individuals to the ownership of private property in the means of production. This yields a model of class relations which is basically dichotomous (since some own and others do not, some work and others live off the fruits of those who labour): All class societies are built around a primary line of division between two antagonistic classes, one dominant and the other subordinate. (Giddens, 1971).

Social class and buying behavior

Social class has an influence on buying behavior and it also formalize the life style of people (Rich and Jain, 1968). Consumer buying behavior is decision of consumer towards make any purchase. This buying behavior depends upon his/her perception, learning from environment, awareness about new brands information in the market and thinking process. According to theory of buying behavior by (Howard and Sheth, 1969) consumer made buying behavior cycles and perform according to it. For durable goods these cycles are large and for daily use goods these cycles are small. In social comparison theory people from different groups and backgrounds compare themselves on different attributes with others. According to their estimated opinions and attitudes they ranked themselves. Basically, they defined their own status in accordance with others. Comparison is made on objective and subjective basis (Festinger, 1954). People analyze and judge themselves with the most likely and

preferred groups by them, and try to associate with that group (Back, 1951). Social class explains the various behaviors of people according to their perception, attitudes, motivation and believes. It also depicts the shopping, fashion and clothing behavior of consumers (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). People try to attain standard through clothing and fashion which meet their class. Whereas in old age people clothing does not have any substantial effect, the thing which matters is their self which they see and judged by others (Lee and Sontag, 2010) and that includes their own perception about position in the specific social class (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Younger people change and develop their personal style repeatedly as directed by their choices, as it is a natural thing and reality (Ebenkam, 2005).

Stores aesthetic give the impression for belonging to specific social class. From where consumers shop determine their social class. Wal Mart has an identical image for all social class groups whether it is lower-middle or upper-lower class. Consumers belong to lower class try to bargain to the maximum extent (Hamilton, 2009). Store image is created by the retailers who match their target social class image with that of store which communicates the advertising message completely (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Marketers organized marketing programs and shape it in the manner which best fits its social class status (Rich and Jain, 1968). "Social class mediates the relationship between input (stimuli from the marketing and social environments) and output (variety of responses which the buyer is likely to manifest, based on the interaction between stimuli and his internal state) by influencing (1) specific motives, (2) decision mediators (3) the evoked set and (4) inhibitors (Howard and Sheth, 1969)." Man is living in a society and effect by the social environment which has impact on purchase decision and their behavior (Howard and Sheth, 1969). Shopping behavior differ according to class to

class. Social differences exist between low income groups and high income group's families. Families with low income feel that priorities made by them are incompatible, which force them to bargain and choose suitable strategies for consumption decision (Hamilton, 2009).

"The purchasing power of the middling and lower classes might rise, but the elite could hold on to its monopoly of cultural capital by asserting that wealth was not enough (Thomas, 2009).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research study explores the numerous concepts about social class and different factors which assist it in prevailing in any society. These classes are generally ranked in the society as upper class, middle class and lower class which determine the status of people by belonging to specific class categories. It supports people in building their behavior, image and attitude towards the society. On the basis of literature relationship between variables which made social class are developed and its combine effect on consumer buying behavior is studied. Relationship is examined between the variables which depicts that social class, is affected by different determinants which predict it. These determinants are income, occupation, status, and education. These variables all contribute in formalizing the social class. Social class has influenced on the purchasing behavior of consumers. It also affects the consumption patterns of consumers. By inspiring from reference group people make purchase decision in order to attach with that group. People also avoid purchasing of low price product as they considered it for low class. Income affects a lot in this regard. Marketers design segmentation on the basis of social classes because people within same social class share same attitude, values and behavioral patterns (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Finally, In the light of literature these hypotheses are proposed, Hypothesis 1: Education has directly linked with social class, Hypothesis 2: Income has directly linked with social class, Hypothesis 3: Status has directly linked with social class, Hypothesis 4: Occupation has directly linked with social class, Hypothesis 5: Social class has direct impact on consumer buying behavior.

DISCUSSION

Several classes exist in the society which has influence on the consumer buying behavior (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). Social class illustrates the economic well being of a person and economic conditions of a person depict the resources people have in order to make purchase decision. Capacity to spend is dependent on the economic resources people have. People from high class spend more on luxury products and prefer to buy rare, unique and imported products and well reputed brands because they have more resources to spend and they prefer luxurious lifestyle (Han et al., 2010). People from middle class are intelligent and spend on quality products within their means. People who belong to low class spend their resources on buying necessities of life and even accept low quality products. Buying behavior also change as people move from upward or downward in their position of social class. Products which people use

show their social belonging of class and status. As people move upward (to high class) their preferences and taste also changed. People used brands as a status symbol and associate themselves with that brand's community and try to become a part of that. Social class also determines some aspects of product like its quality, quantity and its categories which customers of different class buy (Loudon and Bitta, 1993). Social class is a reality as it affects lifestyle, attitude, and behaviors of people. People go in pizza hut and McDonalds for dinner, now in our society it becomes a symbol of status to go there and have food. People in Pakistan have misperceptions about social class. They consider status and wealth as a symbol of high class whereas these material things are not for long time duration they thing which last is their social practices, manners, behaviors towards individual and society, it shows how much a person is educated and have respect for others.

Educated people have their own criteria of class. People from urban areas have different attitude than people from rural areas. Their buying behavior and preferences and choices of products are totally diverse. Age and gender also play pivotal role in buying various products. Younger people have different buying preferences as compare to older people. Older people did not mold themselves easily according to the new trends, but younger people have flexibility to change their styles and looks (Ebenkam, 2005). That is the reason their buying preferences of purchasing are different. Hypothesis 1 states that education has directly linked with social class. From literature it is proved that education can be one factor which contributes in attainment of social class (Bullock and Limbert, 2003). It is one of the main factors through which one can move upward or downward in the society. Through education people can attain stabilize the social classes (Johnson, 2010). Hypothesis 2 states that occupation has directly linked with social class. On the basis of literature this hypothesis is also proved that occupation is a factor through which people can move upward or downward in the society. Better occupation has more chances to move upward in society and it reflects the status of people (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2004). Hypothesis 3 states that status has directly linked with social class. People in the society ranked on the basis of their status (Schiffman et al., 2003). Status play pivotal role in determining the class of people in the society (Dominquez and Page, 1981).

Hypothesis 4 states that income has directly linked with social class. Studies of income and social class prove this hypothesis that income has link with class in the society (Schiffman et al., 1997). People with more income spend more and try to achieve high status. Social class has influenced the buying behavior of consumers. Their attitude, feelings toward brand or products exhibit their class reflection. Hypothesis 5 states that social class has direct impact on consumer buying behavior. This hypothesis also accepted on the basis of previous studies done in this area. Consumer buying behavior reflects

their status in the society and depicts from which class they belong to (Schiffman et al., 2010). People from different class show numerous behaviors in their purchase and shopping process (Rich and Jain, 1968). Firms analyze the classes in the society and made products for their target market accordingly, from which class their target market belongs to. Consumers also make buying behavior cycles and perform according to it, for durable products these cycles are big and for daily use products these cycles are small (Howard and Sheth, 1969).

Managerial implications

Marketers conduct separate marketing programs for different class groups. For elite class marketers target them through different techniques, by providing them branded products which meet their standard and charge high price for it. Marketers must advertise luxury products not only to its target market but to everyone in the market (Han et al., 2010) in this way people of every class recognized the specific brand as luxury. Middle class income group should targeted on several basis by providing them products within their range, attract them through advertising techniques through the medium to which they have approach. Sales are major attraction for people not only for lower class but for middle class as well. Seasonally or occasionally sales can be conducted to attract a major share of customers. A good marketer has to keep in view attitude of his/her prospective buyer in specific market.

Limitation and future research

This research discussion was based on classes in society and eventually its effects on consumers buying behavior. Social classes are reality and they contribute in the buying behavior of consumers in either way. More empirical research is required as this study is based on literature. Further research can be done by test the effect of social classes on buying behavior. Marketing is a vast field covering numerous issues and areas. This research is conducted by combining the literature of two fields marketing and one sub field of social sciences. Future research can be study in further different areas of marketing and social sciences.

CONCLUSION

Social class is a reality not myth in buying behavior of consumers. The purchase decisions made by the individuals are directly affected by the social class they belong to. The dimensions of social class such as income, status, occupation and education attainment have a direct impact on the way an individual spends his

income. The higher the income of a person, the greater will be his capacity to spend an extra income on comfort and luxury goods to increase his standard of living. Literature supported the issue of classes that it is a real phenomenon and these are form on the basis of income, status, education and occupation. People from every class depict a variety of behavior. Social class provides support for the behaviors which people adopt while making purchase. Marketers target their audience according to their social class and buying behavior of that specific class. It is a reality but it brings awful effects in the society. It becomes cause of conflict, social inequalities, and injustice. Gap between rich and poor people increase due to this man made concept of social classes. To bring peace and prosperity everyone should find ways to reduce these differences and made contribution towards its elimination.

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