

# **SOCIOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF MARKETING AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR**

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## ***Abstract***

*Marketing as an eclectic discipline has borrowed heavily from psychology, economics, mathematics, and sociology. The influence of sociology on marketing and its implications for consumer behaviour cannot be over emphasized. Sociology has lent so many concepts which have underscored marketing thoughts and have provided significant insights into the study and understanding of the discipline of marketing. Concepts borrowed from sociology such as roles, norms, status, society, culture, social groups, reference groups, family life cycle, etc, which deal with individuals/people who are the mainstay of marketing efforts, have helped marketing practitioners to understand the consumer better and how he goes about his purchase decisions based on his relationship with and membership in the group/society which he belongs. These concepts are very relevant to the consumer as he cannot ignore or act in isolation from the groups he belongs which impact on him and vice versa. These all affect his consumption patterns and determine his action at one point or the other. Hence, a thorough knowledge of the contributions of sociology to marketing will help marketing managers to develop, design and implement strategies aimed at superior performance of the firm which will lead to customer patronage and ultimately, satisfaction.*

**Keywords:** Marketing, Sociology, Norms, Society, Social groups, Reference groups, Family life cycle,

## **Introduction**

Marketing relates to exchange between social actors e.g. individuals, groups, organizations, it is a behavioral science which seeks to explain exchange relationships (Hunt 1983). Similarly, sociology is an area of study that is concerned with understanding human behaviour in groups and social settings. Using sociology for solving marketing problems has a long standing tradition as marketing has been recognized as a borrowing discipline, in particular from the social sciences. Sociology provides concepts which increase the effectiveness of marketing management strategies and the institutional interpretation of marketing because marketing activities take place in a social context where man is seen to be conditioned not only by psychological factors but also by customs, mores, institutions and values produced by his interaction in the social structure. Thus, sociology unarguably, has considerably influenced the field of marketing by contributing vital concepts, models and theories to marketing that is focused primarily on individuals and the society at large.

This paper thus examines the basic sociological concepts, models and theories which have influenced the growth of marketing and its implications for both consumer behaviour and marketing management.

## **Objectives of the Study**

The study has the following objectives

1. To examine the relationship between sociology and marketing.
2. To examine the sociological concepts that have influenced the growth of the field of marketing.
3. To assess the implications of these sociological concepts for marketing management and consumer behaviour.

## Marketing and Sociology

According to the American Marketing Association (2004), marketing is an organization function and set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders. Hallman (2003), thus suggests that marketing involves exchange of goods, exchange of values, supporting financial goals of the firm, supporting the benefits of diverse stake holders and the management of individual exchanges. This suggests that marketing and its activities are both internal (creating, communication and delivery value) and external (managing customer relationships, exchange of values and supporting the benefits of diverse stake holders).

Hunt (1983:\*\*\*) states that marketing is a scientific discipline which relates to the exchange between social actors, e.g. individuals, groups or organizations. He further opines that marketing is a behavioural science which seeks to explain exchange relationships. Based on this, Kotler (1984), establishes that exchange requires;

1. The presence of (at least) two parties
2. That each party has something to offer that might be of value to the other party.
3. Each party is capable of communication and delivery.
4. Each party is free to accept or reject an offer.
5. Each party believes it is appropriate or desirable to deal with the other party.

Therefore, marketing is a management activity that takes place in a social context which creates exchanges between social animals.

On the other hand, sociology is one of the major social sciences. According to Kjell and Ingeborg (1995), the term 'sociology' was invented by Auguste Comte and first published in the fourth volume of his *cours de philosophie positive* in 1838, even though the ancient roots of the discipline can be traced back, to among others, Plato and Aristotle. The term sociology is a combination of the two terms *Socius* (Latin) which means 'companion' and *Logos* (Greek) which means 'study of'. Thus literally, sociology means "the study of the process of companionship" (Baker, 1995). Other experts in the field have defined the term variously.

According to Giddens (1993: 7), sociology is "the study of human life, groups and societies". A key point in the sociological perspective is that man does not operate in a vacuum, but is embedded in the surrounding social context. The individual forms and holds expectations about others and because he or she is assumed to behave purposefully, expectations about others are taken into account. This basic point of departure has a distinct parallel in marketing as marketing activities take place in a social context. Exchange requires the presence of and access to others and successful transaction of business involves others. As Kjell and Ingeborg (1995) further state, the individual-in-context is a human being interacting with his or her social environment. The sociological perspective tries to encompass the acting person and the acting group.

Therefore the relationship between marketing and sociology is borne out of the reality that marketing is a managerial activity that involves exchange of value between consumers (social actors). Since these exchanges are carried out in the society among individuals, it becomes pertinent that marketing managers must study the society which they operate and how the society affects the behaviour of these social actors, in order for the firm to operate effectively in the society. For marketing managers to effectively understand and adapt to the society, they have to adopt basic sociological theories and concepts in their strategies, theorizations and models. This supports our earlier assertion that marketing is profusely indebted to sociology for its imminent contributions to the development of marketing which has also created a synergy between the two fields of study. Thus, marketing is not only related to sociology as a behavioural science, but is equally indebted to it for the borrowed concepts and theories which have aided exchange between/among social actors. To effectively analyze the contributions of sociology to marketing, we therefore examine the basic sociological concepts that have lent support to the development of marketing thoughts.

## **Contribution of Sociology to the Development of Marketing**

Many authors in sociology have made vivacious contributions towards the development of marketing through publishing of articles and conceptualizations of basic concepts, ideas and models. These concepts have aided the development and enhancement of relationships within the society where marketing operates and the social actors (individuals) who engage in the exchange of value produced by the organization. Sociologists first viewed marketing as a system. Fisk (1967), had tried to structure all marketing activities by introducing the marketing system as a set of marketing activities. He noted that a system is “any set of interactive variables”. “Marketing systems, he argued, separates two sets of problems: (1) problems of stimulating demand by planning new products, by advertising and selling, and by pricing goods to attract customers and (2) problems of physical distribution to serve demand”. Fisk’s notion of marketing system was a solid attempt to structure a strongly diversified discipline. In the same year, Adler (1967) presented an alternative systematic approach. He argued that “whether we like it or not, marketing is, by definition, a system, if we accept Webster’s definition of system as “an assemblage of objects united by some form of regular interaction or interdependence”. He further uses mathematical or logical models to describe, quantify and evaluate alternate marketing strategies.

Halbert (1965), in another view suggested applying sociology and behavioural sciences in marketing. His point was that the concept of rational and non-rational behaviour leads us naturally to consider integrating the social and behavioural sciences into marketing theory. He strongly recommends integrating social sciences into marketing for theory development, as behavioural sciences have developed a group of techniques admirably suited for use in developing marketing theory. Furthermore, the notion ‘social’ is also used in marketing theory as stated in Kotler and Zaltmann (1971) insightful ‘social marketing’ article. The goal of these authors was to broaden the concept of marketing towards non-economic application of marketing knowledge. Although social systems theory was not part of their agenda, however, the importance of society in marketing activities was reflected in their work as much as in Bartel’s et al; (1965) definition of marketing as a “process in a society”.

Though the individual views of these sociologists have enlightened marketing knowledge of the society, it has not outlined the individual concepts that marketing has borrowed from sociology in order to enhance its relationship with its consumers and the society at large. Thus, Kjell and Ingeborg (1995) outline these concepts based on their characteristics in three categories. These are;

1. Individuals
2. Groups
3. Larger society

### **Individual Conceptual Characteristics:**

The individual conceptual characteristics that have influenced marketing practice include:

#### **Role**

Abercumbie (1988), states that an important sociological concept is ‘role’ which can be conceived as the bundles of socially defined attributes and expectations associated with social positions. The concept of role is sociologically important because it reflects how individual activity is socially influenced, thus, it follows regular patterns and implies social relationships.

#### **Status**

In any social system, distinction may be made between different social positions, example could be the elites class, middle class and lower class. Also such positions are rank ordered implying that positions may be lower, higher or equal in status.

#### **Norm**

The term norm refers to social expectations about correct or proper behaviour. It represents the presence of legitimacy, consent and prescription. Norms emanate from established values, laws expectations and accepted behaviours and are passed from generation to generation.

### **Groups Conceptual Characteristics**

Sociologically, social groups have been divided into primary, secondary and reference groups. Primary groups suggest small groups defined by face to face interaction while the secondary groups on the other hand suggest a larger collection of people. The secondary groups are larger in number and each member does not necessarily interact directly with every other member. The reference groups refer to those groups of people that influence the behaviour of other members of the society. This occurs because in forming their attitudes and beliefs and in performing their actions, people will compare or identify themselves with other people in other groups of people who usually serve as a reference that guides the actions of others. Other group ideas and conceptions includes, family (household), family life cycle, community, social class, lifestyle and culture. The family which is the basic consuming unit of the society is viewed sociologically as a society's system institution. Nicosia and Neymar (1976: \*\*\*\*) define social system as "a set of specific activities performed by specific people in specific place through time". The family life cycle relates to the development of a person through childhood, adolescence, old age and death. Communities sociologically, are divided into forms such as villages, sections or cities or other groups with something in common. It relates to a set of people who share the same geographical location, religion, beliefs and culture. The social class just as the status concept explains societal phenomenon where members of the society are ranked according to status of wealth, education, age or some other characteristics. The social class concept directly links us to the lifestyle concept where consumption patterns and values vary across different societal strata. Finally, the cultural and subcultural conceptual characteristic of sociological groups refers to the patterns of behaviours and values that influence not only how one behaves but also how one expects others to behave. Culture relates to the way of life of a people in a particular place which is passed on from generation to generation. Hall (1976), dichotomized culture in the context of communication as 'high' versus 'low' where foreign countries are viewed as having 'high cultural contexts' which depends on nonverbal, 'hidden' insights of communication while low cultural context relays more on explicit verbal communication and symbols. On the other hand, subculture refers to a system of values, attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles of a social group which is distinct from, but related to the dominant culture of society.

### **Larger Society Conceptual Characteristics**

The sociological characteristics of the larger society that have influenced marketing include; relationships, power, network and conflict. The relationship concept explains that a relationship takes place between two actors and last for a reasonable period of time. Basically, relationships assist in the exchange of goods, information and money which facilitates the marketing process. In the same vein, the network concept is often described as a system of relationship between social actors. Relationships and networks imply reciprocity, that is, the implicit norm to do things for each other. Conflict and Power also are related even as varying sociological concepts. Conflict arises in situations where social actors in exhibiting purposeful behavior, for example to gain market share, or to make money, have a clash interest. On the other hand, power as defined by Weber (1946:\*\*\*) is "the probability of a person in a social relationship to carry out his or her own will in pursuit of goals and actions, regardless of resistance".

Summarily, marketing has borrowed and applied sociological concepts which in true sense capture aspects of social relationships. These sociological concepts have been applied primarily as tools to identify and characterize target groups and in the efforts to improve marketing performance. Thus, the development of marketing has greatly been influenced by these sociological concepts. It therefore becomes pertinent to view the implications of these sociological concepts on both marketing management and consumer behaviour respectively.

### **Implications of Sociological Foundation for Both Marketing Management and Consumer Behaviour.**

Despite apparent skepticism, grand sociological theories are in vogue in most areas of marketing research and development. To effectively highlight the benefits of sociology, its various contributions will be reviewed to analyze its implications for the development of marketing management and consumer behaviour.

### **Sociological Implication for Marketing Management**

Many sociological concepts have been applied in marketing management by firms and organizations to facilitate effective strategy planning, formulation and execution. From the individual characteristics, concept of role has influenced marketing in various ways. The prototypical expectations associated with various roles of individuals have been used to identify and profile target groups as the basis for designing appropriate market approaches (Baker, 1995). The prototypical expectations associated with various roles (example 'mother' and 'working woman') have been used to identify and profile target groups as the basis for designing appropriate Marketing approaches (Baker, 1995:91).

Equally, the much used roles played in buying decisions as initiator, influencer, decider, buyer, user, gatekeeper, have provided dimensions for positioning and targeting (Baker, 1995; Kotler, 2008; Mogaba, 2006; Schiffman and Kanuk ,2008). Kjell and Ingeborg (1995) explain that the concept of status has directly and indirectly influenced marketing. For example, the observation that things may symbolize status has been extensively used to develop, introduce and communicate product. Thus, the status concept is the foundation for product differentiation where expensive products are produced for the elitist class and the less expensive products for the middle and lower class of the society.

Norms have guided marketing managers to be aware of the norms of the society in order to behave appropriately. Since norms specify behaviours, it is important for marketers to know the norms that dominate any market place. This is so because prevailing norms could be a barrier to acceptance of new products and /or the slow growth of a product. For example, as the society is becoming more fast-paced with more demands on one's time, and more women getting involved in working outside the home, those tasks that were hitherto seen as against the prescribed norms for wives are being relegated to service providers in order to conserve time for more productivities. Such tasks include cooking/eating outside, the use of washing machines and purchase of services and products that take the place of normal tasks performed by family members. Thus, the concept and knowledge of norms are extensively used as inputs in market research to get adequate information about target market and their acceptable patterns of behavior which helps in product planning and development as well as advertising strategies.

Group characteristics also have some implications for marketing management. The primary group whose typical example could be a nuclear family is seen in marketing as the basic consuming unit of a firm's products and services while the secondary groups are referred to as buying groups or centers. The characteristics of the buying group or center such as its members' tasks and activities etc., influence to a large extent the marketing strategies of an organizations. Also the reference groups also influence marketing strategies because firms will always want to target their products at those set of people that directly or indirectly influence the decisions of others. Thus, those groups that are emulated by others in the society tend to be targeted by firms so that others would buy their products through emulation or their suggestion.

Other societal concepts also have their implications for marketing. The family influences marketing as the basic consuming unit and serves as a basis for studying purchase decision processes in terms of who influences the decision and how families allocate their scarce resources and time. Thus, marketing concentrates its efforts on these set of people. The life cycle concept influences marketing in terms of target market profiling and production of future market development as the individual grows from one stage to another in his life cycle. Communities, some of which are located in remote areas have necessitated the development and application of electronic marketing to aid consumers in these communities to be electronically connected through the internet such that their demands could be met at real time even at a far distance, thus facilitating place utility.

The lifestyle concept has influenced marketing to evolve a more psychological orientation, with an emphasis on identifying specific lifestyle of certain groups of people for the purpose of mapping out consumption activities based on habits, attitudes and opinions of this set of people, thus, aiding proper

segmentation strategies. Culture has helped marketing and marketers to know the various symbols, languages and beliefs of people from one place to another such that they know how to adapt to these different cultures when crossing borders. The knowledge of culture has also facilitated the development of international trade strategies, designing of adequate marketing strategies, choice of markets and improvement of inter-cultural trade negotiations. Marketing adopted the subculture concepts to primarily study the buying and consumption activities and lifestyle of special groups within a culture. Thus, this has been applied in marketing for understanding consumption of a distinct subgroup of the society on the basis of product class, brand as cited from Shouten and Alexander (1995), examples of the owners of Harley Davidson motorcycle.

Power influences marketing in terms of who owns the right in every marketing activity. An example is when the consumer is described as 'king' therefore suggesting that the consumer is the reason for any activity and all efforts should be geared towards his satisfaction. As such, marketing managers must ensure that the consumer's interest is put first before others. This ensures that all marketing strategies and activities must be directed towards the satisfaction of the consumer.

### **Sociological Implications for Consumer Behaviour**

Just as sociology has implications for marketing management and its strategies, it also has many implications on consumer behaviour. The role concept suggests the expectations of the society from a particular individual. This affects the consumption pattern of males and females in the society. Thus, an individual's consumption pattern is stereotyped according to the roles he plays and the expectations of the society such that the individual cannot consume goods which society forbids as not being within the category of his or her role. In the same vein norms and status also affect the individual's consumption pattern and behaviour respectively. Certain societies have their acceptable patterns of behaviour which are laid down in that society such that certain things are declared a taboo. Individuals in such societies no matter the quality, innovativeness and usefulness of such products will not consider buying such products as it is a taboo and unacceptable in their society. Status on the other hand suggests social positions of individuals in the social system. Some are positioned as the elites, middle class and lower class. Because of the social status individuals view goods and services differently. The elites will always be the early adopters of any product they find expensive and which portrays their status while the middle class because of financial constraint will always go for the less expensive and most likely inferior goods. Thus, the consumption pattern will always be structured directly according to price, quality, brand and how the product affects their social status.

The group sociological concepts also affect the consumption behaviour and pattern of individuals. Primary, secondary and reference groups affect consumption patterns of an individual in terms of the influence exerted by these groups on the individuals. Here, emphasis will be placed on reference groups which serve as a standard which an individual measures his behaviour or consumption pattern against in a particular society. Hence, this group of individuals influences to a large extent how a consumer views quality, brand and satisfaction. Also, just as the secondary group tailor an individual's consumption pattern towards the pattern of the general group, the reference groups influence the individual's judgment of right and wrong in his consumption behaviour.

Other group sociological concepts that influence consumer behaviour are; family, life cycle, culture and structure. Family affects the consumer behaviour in terms of acceptable consumption patterns within the family. All families have varying views towards consumption. Thus, an individual from birth is instilled with these patterns which forms a major part of his consumption behaviour all his life. The life cycle of an individual relates to the stages of growth of an individual from childhood to old age. This affects his consumption behaviour because as he grows, the products that he used during childhood will not be used during adulthood. Consequently, his consumption behaviour is directly proportional to each stage of his life cycle. Community, culture and subculture relate to the acceptable patterns of behaviour in a particular environment. An individual's consumption behaviour will be influenced by these acceptable patterns of behaviour as not abiding by these patterns could be seen as breaking established laws in the society. Finally, lifestyle affects an individual's consumption pattern as he will always want to keep up with the expectations of his social class and status. Once an individual has attained a particular stage in

life, status or belongs to a particular social class, he is expected to conform to the consumption behaviour expected of the class he belongs and this becomes a lifestyle as long as he remains in such status or class.

The larger societal concepts of sociology also have significant effects on the consumption behaviour of the individual in the society. The individual that views a cordial exchange relationship with organizations as satisfying will definitely call for a repurchase but if the relationship was not satisfying, the individual will not build his consumption pattern towards such products or organization. The network an individual builds affects his consumption pattern. His exposure to the internet and social media affects his consumption pattern as he is exposed to more products and alternatives and even how other people apart from his family, community and culture, behave which changes his views about consumption. Power and conflict are related as the wrong application of power leads to conflict. The consumer always loves to be treated as 'king', as the one who holds the power of every marketing activity. Thus, where this power is tempered with, it results in conflict that affects his consumption behaviour towards a particular firm and its products.

### **Conclusion**

Marketing has borrowed extensively from sociology to aid its development especially in the areas of enhancing an effective relationship between its consumers and the society at large. These sociological concepts which are categorically divided into individual, groups and societies have been applied primarily as tools to identify and characterize target groups in an effort to improve marketing performance.

Thus, these sociological foundations aside from fostering a good relationship between sociology and marketing hold significant implications for marketing management and consumer behaviour in terms of enhancing marketing management efficiency and adaptability to society and also to the individual consumer, thus, ensuring satisfaction.

### **Managerial Implications**

Based on the literature review, we observe the following implications for the manager

- i. That marketing managers should ensure the continuous application of sociology in the field of marketing so as to maximize their relationship with their consumers and the environment at large.
- ii. That marketing managers should continuously implement the concepts of sociology in their strategies and decision making processes in order to maintain acceptance, patronage and loyalty in their operating environment.
- iii. That though consumers are accustomed with the norms, roles, cultures etc. of their society, they should also be exposed to other cultures, innovations and contemporary products, relationships and networks that can help maximize their satisfaction. Thus, marketing managers should create strategies that inculcate ICT, the use of internet, relationship marketing etc., that will help consumers to be dynamic in their purchase pattern irrespective of their environment.

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