

“A Review of Subculture and Its Role in Marketing”

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Introduction

This paper reviews the term subculture and the impact that it has in marketing that is often overlooked by practitioners in their decision making. Subcultural influences have been thoroughly researched in psychological and social fields of study. However, it has been ignored and given little consideration in real world marketplace decision making. As marketing borrows many theories of consumer behavior from the aforementioned fields, it only makes sense to critically acknowledge and exercise sound subcultural theory when it comes to strategic and tactical decision making in a real world environment. Understanding what subculture is and how it is defined is a key start in recognizing its importance in marketing.

What is Subculture?

Subculture is defined as a distinct cultural group that exists as an identifiable segment within a larger, more complex society (Schiffman & Kanuk 1991). Schiffman and Kanuk (1991) further state that the members of a subculture usually possess beliefs, values and customs that are distinct from other members of the same society. Two distinct elements exist in a culture that includes: (1) the unique beliefs, values and customs pertaining to the specific subculture and (2) the central or core theme within a culture that are common to most of the population. As an example, let's look at the African and Hispanic American subcultures. Each subculture has its own unique norms, traits and orientation. However, both groups still share the dominant traits of the American culture. Therefore, it is important to note that the advent of subcultural research enables the practitioner to have a microscopic look at smaller market segments and maximize profits in today's competitive yet fragmented market place (Schiffman & Kanuk 1991). Notably, this will allow the marketer to better understand the distinctive beliefs, values and customs that separate subcultures from the larger more homogeneous society.

It is important to note that "subculture" is derived from and related to the term "culture". The concept "culture" must therefore be understood in order to properly investigate the proposed topic of concern, "subculture". Gerth and Mills (1973) state that culture is one of the most spongy words in social science. However, they believe it is equally and enormously useful. The concept of "culture" is more a loose reference to social milieu than an adequate idea of social structure (Gerth & Mills 1973). The term is very ambiguous and this proves to be a double-edged advantage for academics and observers. Consequently, one can easily structure the

term to apply to the situation or problem at hand. Additionally, the terms culture and structure are two terms that sociologists use and study interchangeably to describe social interactions of mankind (Gerth and Mills 1973). However, Clarke (1974) contends that the two concepts are different. He states that the styles of the two are clearly different because the structural perspective looks at social events and the cultural perspective looks into the analysis of meaning. It should naturally follow that when examining 'subculture', we are looking at an organized set of meanings that presumably bear some relation to a larger more inclusive set called 'culture'.

Clarke (1974) views the term 'subculture' as having some underlying utility even if it is coupled with a superficial lack of clarity. He analyzes the underlying validity of the concept of subculture by looking at three issues: (1) the general issue of culture and structure as perspectives on social problems and differences, (2) the problem of the definition of the boundaries of a subculture and (3) the question of the genesis, maintenance and change of subcultures. Clark (1974) states that very little attention has been given to whether 'subculture' is a useful concept, whether it should be abandoned or broken into components for clearer understanding and analyses.

What about the boundaries of subculture? When is a subculture not a subculture? Clark states that societies consist of overlapping subcultures rather than a single one. The terms; size (the number that comprises the subculture), specificity of boundaries (sharpness of classification of the subculture), inclusiveness and identity (what constitutes membership and how much of a person's identity is involved) and the dynamics of boundary specificity (with time comes change and subcultures are redefined) is used to help elevate the problem of boundary specification of subcultures. Notably, when talking about race relations, there is an assumption that assimilation processes will be taking place to form subcultures. Additionally, boundaries of the subculture vary in their hardness (resistant to change) or softness (vulnerability to change) overtime. There is a process that involves the genesis and change of subcultures that make this area dynamic. Interestingly, at the specific processes, we have a softening example where: (1) absorption or assimilation occurs where subcultural identity steadily diminishes until it disappears, (2) the process may be arrested at a certain stage by resistance to assimilation (as in the case of some Jews where they view themselves as a 'maverick' and 'legitimate' variant group within society, (3) going out in the opposite direction (hippies, addicts and rappers) and finally (4) cults and homosexuals that are beginning to isolate themselves from the rest of society.

How Subcultures Are Formed

The genesis, maintenance and change of subcultures are based heavily on endogenous and exogenous means. Subcultures are formed exogenously based heavily on contact within the culture whereas; endogenous means have dominated most of the previous research concerning subcultures. This brings one back to the relationship between culture and structure. Cohen's theory (1955) argued that for individuals in certain positions in society that could not reach their desired goals, deviance followed the weakening of the adherence to the prescribed means to obtain certain goals and thus subculture formulation began. Merton (1967) argues that culture and social structure are not properly aligned and integrated and that the discontinuities create tensions that are only extinguished by deviance. In other words, the person is shaping the culture to fit his/her structural demands. We can see that these two theories hold true in today's formulation of subculture. They simply begin from a point of not being accepted or able to access a larger culture. Therefore, as long as a structural problem exists, there will be subcultural formulation.

Matza (1964) provocatively argued that explanations based on the motivating impact of the deviant subculture on the individual and group has been the most common explanations of deviance within a society. This statement remains unclear and vague today in reference to how it specifically fits in the development of subcultures.

We must keep in mind that if subcultures are seen as solutions to structural tensions, then the interaction of subculture and culture has significant importance that merits attention. A perfect example of a structural tension that has induced a subculture would be today's 'rap music' subculture. These subcultures of musicians are distinct from the normal artists in the field. One essential element of the art form is that the artists don't sing at all on any of the selections on the offering. The 'rapper' talks and the delivery of the message is an interesting one that talks about the inability to live a normal and mainstream American life. Obviously, the art form has developed into a large subcultural following because the growth of 'rap music' in the music industry is second to no other music category. The 'rappers' have changed and influenced many youths of all races to change their style of dress, talk and mannerisms (Bennett 1987). Cohen (1955) states that the subculture acquires instant notoriety and hence is exciting as a solution and its boundaries are simultaneously more precisely specified. A subculture can receive strong positive reaction from society, thus yielding mass assimilation which would result in the

extinction of the subculture. If this is the case, the boundaries become less specific and the life of the subculture can be classified as one of the critical responses of a limited group to structural tensions.

There is an amplification process that can also occur that will make the subculture yield to harsh vigilance and toughness that life within the subculture becomes intolerable. For example, only after Charles Manson and his followers received a lot of pressure from mainstream America, did the group become weakened and finally extinct? Consequently, there are times when this process will cause groups to stabilize themselves from culture. A perfect example of this is when communes are formed to allow the subculture to free itself from the harsh persecution and vigilance that it is being subjected to. Matza (1964) warns about identifying all subcultures as distinctive. Many subcultures exist that are formed based on the same structural tensions that are prevalent in mainstream society. These structural tensions are simply being presented to the public in a different manner or time. Therefore, generations of people carry the same ideas that are simply re-ignited at different times, depending on the situation. Phil Cohen (1972) is adamant that subcultures are a response to situations that are in no way a solution to problems that exist. He further contends that the term 'subculture', by definition can't break out of the contradiction derived from the parent culture, it merely transcribes its terms at a micro social level. Subculture is still defined in terms of the structural conditions which it can't hope to overcome: it is epiphenomenal.

It becomes pertinent to ask not why the subculture arose. A more pertinent question is, has it brought any change? Clarke (1974) argues that maybe it is not the structure that must change in order to reduce the tensions that produce subcultures. He states that maybe the subculture should occur based on other criteria versus just structural tensions alone. One should probably look at endogenous means that have an impact on subcultural development. Subcultures are arguably a response to structural problems, but one must also recognize a subculture as an important source of social and political influence. He concludes by stating that culture which was generated in response to pressing circumstances, once it is accepted as genuine and not anathema, can go on to become less essentially separate and polarized and more sophisticated and complex.

Fine and Kleinman (1979) present an interactionist approach to subculture conceptualization. Their research shows that subculture is not a static system, but that it goes

beyond global attitudes, values or themes. Subculture has been conceived as a set of understanding behaviors and artifacts used by particular groups and diffused through interlocking group networks. Conception explains how cultural elements are common in a population. It also explains the presence of local variations in cultural content through interaction in-group settings and it allows for an understanding of dynamics of subcultural change.

The concept of identification is a static term that serves as the motivation for socialization into the subculture. As the identification with a group belonging to the same subculture declines, withdrawal should occur. Individuals within the affective boundaries of the interlocking group network that are in the subcultural population are those most heavily committed to the subculture. Consequently, as the group network and identification grows, more people are attracted to the subculture. Subculture has been treated as 'sub society' and it should be obvious that there are differences in 'subculture' and 'subsociety' (Fine and Klienman; 1979). Distinctions between the two can help clear up the conceptualization problem that researchers have been debating over the past years.

Conclusion

This takes us back to our proposed question, is there such a thing as subculture? If there is, how do we then define it? Based on the literature, we can say that subculture is a useful concept that is dynamic, structurally (environmentally) and internally (personally formed based on values, beliefs and attitudes) derived. The exogenous and endogenous formulations of subcultures are activated depending on the salient cues that are present in a situation. It is equally important to note that subculture formulation can be positive and negative. How the subculture is viewed, has a lot to do with its viability in society or more appropriately, mainstream culture. Today's practitioner is faced with understanding a multitude of marketing subcultures. However, with careful analysis, the practitioner may be able to group certain subcultures into larger subcultures and never miss any marketing opportunities. Notably, the marketer may also develop proactive marketing campaigns that will counter the dynamics of subcultural formulation. The concept of subculture has been in debate for many years. Current research has strayed away from wrestling with the concept. However, the dynamic structural and internal nature of mankind has not allowed the concept to go unnoticed. Social and political

problems continue to haunt America because of a lack of a thorough conceptualized and defined term for subculture.

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