

Bachelor's degree in International Business

CULTURAL FACTORS IN INTERNATIONAL MARKETING: ARE THEY MORE INFLUENTIAL THAN SOCIAL AND PERSONAL FACTORS?

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Academic year: 2024-2025

Second semester, ordinary assessment

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Abstract

Understanding consumer behaviour is essential for effective marketing strategies, as it involves complex interactions between several agents. This paper examines the relative importance of cultural factors compared to social and personal factors, within the scope of international consumer behaviour's external factors. Using primary and secondary data proceeding from a wide range of sources, such as interviews to field experts or a survey to the general public, we intend to find an answer to the above-mentioned research question. Through the rejection of the two auxiliary hypotheses, which pit against each other a proxy of each factor, it is eventually concluded that cultural factors do not exert a stronger influence than the remaining two. As the former act in more subtle and subconscious manners, they tend to be overlooked and be perceived as less influential. This provides marketers with further and additional information to better design any type of marketing campaign.

Keywords: consumer behaviour, external factors, cross-cultural marketing, culture, reference groups, social class, lifestyle.

Resum

Entendre el comportament del consumidor és essencial per a estratègies de màrqueting efectives, ja que involucra interaccions complexes entre diversos agents. Aquest treball examina la importància relativa dels factors culturals en comparació amb els factors socials i personals, dins de l'àmbit dels factors externs del comportament del consumidor internacional. Utilitzant dades primàries i secundàries procedents d'una àmplia gamma de fonts, com entrevistes a experts del camp o una enquesta al públic general, pretenem trobar una resposta a la pregunta de recerca esmentada anteriorment. A través del rebuig de les dues hipòtesis auxiliars, que enfronten a un representant de cada factor en contra de l'altre, finalment es conclou que els factors culturals no exerciten una influència superior que dos restants. Donat que els primers actuen de manera més subtil i subconscient, tendeixen a ser passats per alt i percebuts com a menys influents. Això proporciona als experts en màrqueting informació addicional més extensa per dissenyar millor qualsevol classe de campanya de màrqueting.

Paraules clau: comportament del consumidor, factors externs, màrqueting intercultural, cultura, grups de referència, classe social, estil de vida.

Resumen

Entender el comportamiento del consumidor es esencial para estrategias de marketing efectivas, puesto que involucra interacciones complejas entre varios agentes. Este trabajo examina la importancia relativa de los factores culturales en comparación con los factores sociales y personales, dentro del ámbito de los factores externos del comportamiento del consumidor internacional. Utilizando datos primarios y secundarios procedentes de una amplia gama de fuentes, como entrevistas a expertos del campo o una encuesta al público general, pretendemos encontrar una respuesta en la pregunta de investigación mencionada anteriormente. A través del rechazo de las dos hipótesis auxiliares, que enfrentan a un representante de cada factor en contra del otro, finalmente se concluye que los factores culturales no ejercitan una influencia superior que los dos restantes. Dado que los primeros actúan de manera más sutil y subconsciente, tienden a ser pasados por alto y percibidos como menos influyentes. Esto proporciona a los expertos en marketing información adicional más extensa para diseñar mejor cualquier clase de campaña de marketing.

Palabras clave: comportamiento del consumidor, factores externos, marketing intercultural, cultura, grupos de referencia, clase social, y estilo de vida.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
CHAPTER I: An introduction to international consumer behaviour	3
1. Types of consumer buying behaviour	4
1.1 Complex-buying behaviour	4
1.2 Dissonance-reducing buying behaviour	5
1.3 Habitual buying behaviour	5
1.4 Variety-seeking buying behaviour	5
2. Consumer behaviour theories	6
2.1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs	6
2.2 Classical conditioning	7
2.3 Conspicuous consumption model	7
3. An international model of consumer behaviour	7
Closure of Chapter I	8
CHAPTER II : The decision-making process and internal factors	9
1. The decision-making process	9
2. Internal factors	11
2.1 Motivation	11
2.2 Perception	12
2.3 Attitudes	13
Closure of Chapter II	13
CHAPTER III: External factors	14
1. Cultural factors	14
1.1 Culture	14
1.2 Subculture	18
1.3 Social class	20
2. Social factors	21
2.1 Reference groups	22
2.2 Family and household	25
3. Personal factors	26
3.1 Age	27
3.2 Personality	28

3.3 Lifestyles.....	29
Closure of Chapter III	30
CHAPTER IV: A cross-cultural practical analysis	31
1. International comparison between culture and reference groups	31
1.1 Literature review	31
1.2 Interview	32
1.3 Survey	35
1.4 Discussion	38
2. International comparison between social class and lifestyles	40
2.1 Literature review	40
2.2 Interview	42
2.3 Survey	43
2.4 Discussion	45
Conclusions	48
Appendix	50
Bibliography	64

Introduction

Understanding consumer behaviour is essential in today's world, given that it influences how businesses operate and how people make everyday decisions. Our behaviours as consumers have the power to shape markets and trends. Its impact can be seen across industries and societies, making it a crucial area of study for anyone seeking to understand the dynamics between individuals and the business realm.

It goes without saying then, that knowing and deeply comprehending consumer behaviour becomes a real asset, not only as an international business major, but also as a consumer myself. Learning how companies see inside consumer's minds, what they look for, and how the outcome plays out in marketing campaigns is an interest of mine that led me to choose this topic. I specifically decided to focus on the external factors that affect consumer behaviour due to the international aspect of them, which appealed more to me.

The main aim of this project is to test the main hypothesis (H_1) that “within the field of international marketing, cultural factors exert a stronger influence on consumer behaviour than social and personal factors”. In order to practically test and assess this hypothesis, the following two auxiliary hypotheses were developed:

H_2 = In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups.

H_3 = In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles.

Due to the limited space and because of the fact that this is a bachelor thesis, I have relied on my prior knowledge and selected those factors that I believe to be more important and the most accurate representation of each category (cultural factors, social factors, and personal factors), hence why not all external factor's components are included in the hypotheses. The methodology used in these hypotheses is the following:

- Secondary data from books and relevant articles making up the theoretical framework and the literature review.
- Primary data from interviews to field experts and a survey to the general public. The experts interviewed are Dr. Jacqueline Eastman and Dr. Seth Ketron. Both of them are some of the world's leading experts in the area of consumer behaviour; moreover, their U.S. nationality gives them different, refreshing perspective, which increases the international validity of this project.

In this way, the main objectives I want to achieve throughout this thesis are to identify how consumer behaviour shapes marketing strategies and learn how real-world brands transfer this theoretical knowledge into practical applications. In addition, I aspire to be able to contribute

somehow to the already existing literature and academic field. Lastly, the backbone of this project is to be able to successfully and confidently give an answer to the hypothesis proposed.

This project aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals. It contributes to SDG 5 (Gender Equality) by acknowledging how gender roles and cultural norms influence consumer decisions, encouraging a more inclusive approach to market behaviour. At the same time, by providing insights that help companies operate more effectively across different markets, the research supports SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth). Finally, by highlighting the factors that drive consumption patterns, the project mirrors SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), fostering more responsible and informed consumption and production practices.

The structure of this paper is comprised in four main chapters. The first three constitute the theoretical framework, the first one being an introductory chapter to consumer behaviour and the following two focusing on specific sections of the model afterwards detailed. The fourth and final chapter represents an empirical assessment, which combines all the theories previously laid out, a literature review, and the primary data collected. Through the key knowledges these provide, the final conclusions will be reached.

CHAPTER I: An introduction to international consumer behaviour

Consumer behaviour is modernly defined as “the study of individuals, groups, or organizations and the processes they use to select, secure, use, and dispose of products, services, experiences, or ideas to satisfy needs and the impacts that these processes have on the consumer and society” (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). The traditional interpretation of consumer behaviour – according to Zikmund and D’Amico (1996) “consumption behaviour corresponds to the activities in which people engage in making selections, purchases.” (Nassè, 2021) – was centred almost exclusively on the buyer and the actions that came immediately before and after the moment of purchasing. According to Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010), the present-day definition provides a looser and broader view of consumer behaviour, allowing more agents to influence consumption decisions, even indirectly.

Consumer behaviour has been a marketing sub-discipline since the 1950s (Mittelstaedt, 1990). Organizations use insights from consumer behaviour – understanding consumers of their brand, as well as those from the competition – in order to create marketing strategies that will seamlessly align with consumer preferences, motivations, and behaviours, ultimately leading to successful results (Bharadwaj, 2023). At the same time, consumer behaviour intends to interfere with the thoughts and feelings of potential buyers to influence sales (Peter & Olson, 2009).

Peter & Olson (2009) state that the knowledge and grasps the aforementioned discipline can provide should not be overlooked. The following questions related to marketing strategy can be answered through consumer behaviour:

Figure 1. Marketing strategy questions consumer behaviour can help answer.

1. Which consumers are likely to buy this product and our brand, what are they like, how are they different from consumers who don't buy, and how do we reach them?
2. What criteria are consumers likely to use to decide which products and brands to purchase? What will the consumer decision process entail, and what will influence it?
3. Is brand image, convenience, price, particular product attributes, or other criteria most important to consumers of this product?
4. What strategies should be used to encourage consumers to purchase our brand and not purchase those of competitors?
5. How do consumers process information about products, and how can this process be influenced to increase the chances that consumers will have a favorable impression of our brand?
6. What do consumers think and feel about our brand versus competitive brands? What can be done to improve their opinion of our brand?
7. How can we increase the chances that consumers will process information about our brand and come up with a favorable impression?
8. What behaviors do consumers have to perform to purchase and use this product and our brand? How can we increase the frequency with which consumers perform these behaviors? Are there opportunities to change the way consumers purchase and use this product that could give us a competitive advantage?

Note. From *Consumer Behaviour & Marketing Strategy* by Peter & Olson (2009)

All in all, we can state that consumer behaviour is an essential discipline within the marketing field (Bharadwaj, 2023).

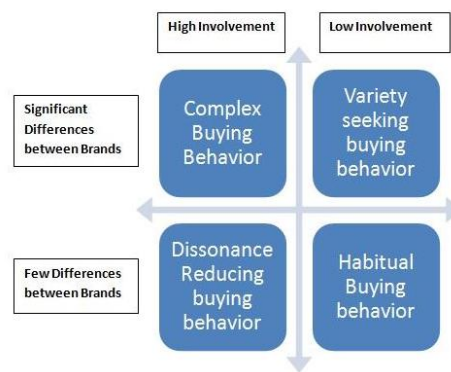
In this first chapter we will focus on the foundation of consumer behaviour. We will establish the types of consumer buying behaviour, understand several consumer behaviour theories, and lastly, determine the framework we will use.

1. Types of consumer buying behaviour

Buying behaviour is plainly described as the acts a consumer undertakes before and during buying a product or service (Gupta, 2023).

When analysing consumer behaviour, four types of buying behaviour arise based on both the level of involvement the consumer experiences – whether they are highly invested in the purchase or not – and the level of risk that purchase conveys. These are: complex-buying behaviour, dissonance-reducing behaviour, habitual buying behaviour, and variety-seeking buying behaviour (Sydorenko, 2023).

Figure 2. Types of consumer buying behaviour.



Note. From *Principles of Marketing* by Albrecht et al. (2023)

Buying behaviours are tightly related with the consumer decision-making process, which will be illustrated later on in this chapter. The more complex and high-involvement the buying behaviour, the more detailed and deliberate the decision-making process.

Throughout this section, we will break down each of these behaviours.

1.1 Complex-buying behaviour

- High involvement - significant differences.

Complex-buying behaviour, also known as extensive buying behaviour, appears when consumers are carrying out an infrequent transaction, commonly due to its high price (*Understanding the 4 Different Types of Consumer Behavior*, n.d.). According to Sydorenko (2023), consumers will investigate thoroughly before actually investing, due to a higher degree of economical or psychological risk.

An example of this type of behaviour includes purchasing high-stakes goods or services, such as a house, a car, an education course... (Sydorenko, 2023).

1.2 Dissonance-reducing buying behaviour

- High involvement - few differences.

Dissonance-reducing buying behaviour, as the previous one, faces a high price and a sporadic purchase. Nonetheless, in this case there are few choices available with little perceptible differences among them. Due to this lack of options, limited time, or reduced budget, the consumer will buy a product without extensive research. Consequently, the buyer may experience this *dissonance*, as they worry they are going to or have chosen wrongly and will regret it in the future (Maryville University, 2023).

For instance, buying new ceramic tiles for the kitchen could be fitting to this behaviour, as there are little to no differences among brands, but is a purchase deemed to be quite important (Sydorenko, 2023).

1.3 Habitual buying behaviour

- Low involvement - few differences.

Habitual buying behaviour arises when consumers buy a product or service on a regular basis (Maryville University, 2023). As it is a routine purchase, it does not require a long thought process behind it; consumer will buy the brand they are used to or, if it is not available or they run into a cheaper one, an alternative of it, i.e, there is no brand loyalty (*Understanding the 4 Different Types of Consumer Behavior*, n.d.).

All kinds of grocery products fit into this category (e.g. eggs, chocolate, bread, etc.) (Sydorenko, 2023).

1.4 Variety-seeking buying behaviour

- Low involvement - significant differences.

In variety-seeking buying behaviour, brand switching is the norm (Albrecht et al., 2023). Given that the cost of switching products is low, consumers will opt for trying new brands out of plain curiosity or boredom. There is no apparent dissatisfaction or discontent with the product previously bought, but there is an urge to discover other options (Sydorenko, 2023).

For example, an individual buys a rose-scented soap without putting much thought into it. Next time they are in the grocery store, they may buy a lavender-scented one, just to try something new (Sydorenko, 2023).

2. Consumer behaviour theories

Theories of human behaviour provide relevant and useful inputs regarding consumer attitudes, given that they offer insights into the why human beings, and by default consumers as well, behave the way they do (University of Pretoria, n.d.).

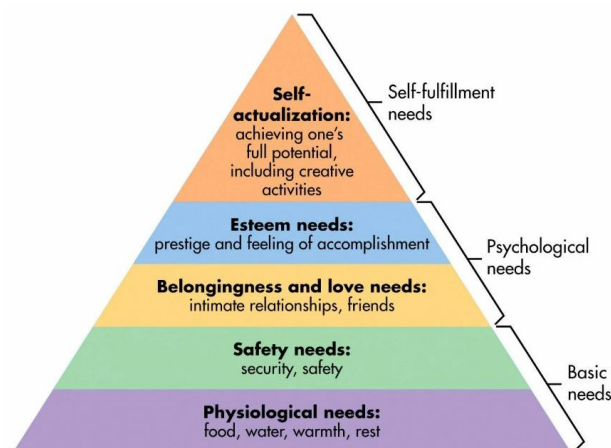
With the objective of gaining a clearer understanding on human behaviour, three theories will be briefly discussed – a more detailed and thorough explanation of each theory can be found in the *Appendix*. These theories will reappear throughout the length of this project since, as aforementioned, they can be suitable to describe certain consumption behaviours, or the reasoning behind them.

2.1 Maslow's hierarchy of needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs, proposed by Abraham Maslow in 1943, offers a framework stating that human motivation derives from a hierarchy of five elementary categories, often depicted in a pyramidal form: psychological, safety, love, esteem, and self-actualization (Hopper, 2024).

Maslow claimed that the needs in the very bottom of the pyramid must be satisfied before a human being can take care of the ones in a higher level. However, the higher up, the more difficult it is to appease the need (McLeod, 2025).

Figure 3. Maslow's hierarchy of needs (pyramid form).



Note. From *Simply Psychology* by Saul McLeod (2025)

Maslow continued expanding on this theory for years, and stated that the order or intensity of these needs could be subject to external circumstances or individual experiences. However this first theory has served as a standpoint and blueprint for both psychology and marketing (McLeod, 2025).

2.2 Classical conditioning

Classical conditioning – also known as Pavlovian conditioning – is a type of unconscious learning through association. The basic idea, is that when two stimuli are linked together, it can produce a learned response from an individual (McLeod, 2024).

Although there are several additional principles in classical conditioning that further expand on how this process work (e.g. spontaneous recovery, stimulus generalization, stimulus discrimination...) (Vinney, 2024), it can be broadly understood through the three phases illustrated in the *Appendix*.

2.3 Conspicuous consumption model

Veblen's theory examines the way in which individuals use consumption to publicly declare their social status, which he calls conspicuous consumption (Zimmer, 2021). According to this model, a person is a "social animal" who tries to fit into the standards of both subcultures and the particular groups they belong to. Human behaviour and needs are modelled after these pseudo-societies (University of Pretoria, n.d.).

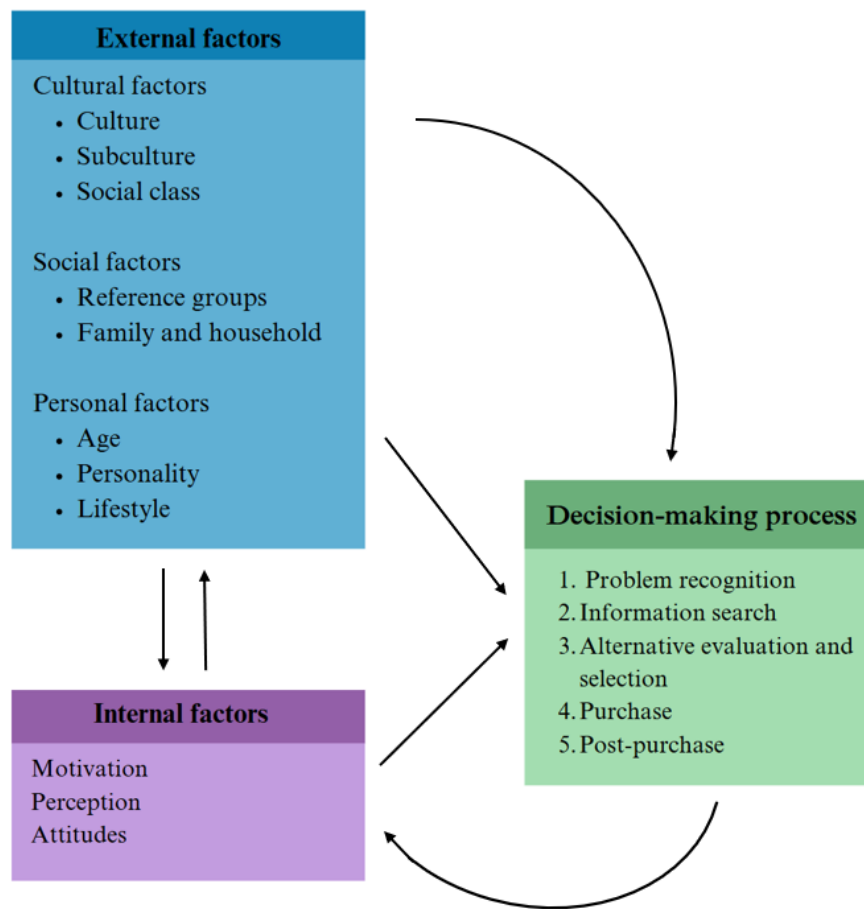
Veblen postulated that conspicuous consumptions stresses the role of norms and cultural expectations when determining consumer behaviour. This suggests that individuals often develop an identity and their whole self-worth from their consumption choices and capabilities (Zimmer, 2021).

3. An international model of consumer behaviour

Figure 5 is the international model that we will use throughout this project to capture the general structure of consumer behaviour. Nevertheless, it is important to note that buyer behaviour is hardly ever so simple and well-structured; this model is simply a reference for our analysis.

Many theories and models have been proposed in this field with the idea of understanding and enclosing it. To this day, no approach is completely recognized or agreed on by every expert (Peter & Olson, 2009). Dividing the factors that influence consumers into categories is relatively arbitrary. For instance, learning will be considered an internal influence, however, learning is a social activity at its core – we learn through human interactions –, thus it could be classified as external (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). In *figure 5*, the arrows reflect the interconnectedness and circularity nature of all factors in the consumer behaviour realm.

Figure 4. An international model of consumer behaviour.



Note. Author's own elaboration, adapted from *Consumer Behaviour Models: An Overview* by Jisana (2014)

In the following chapter, we will depict the decision-making process, as well as the internal factors that affect consumer behaviour. The essence of this project, though, will be found in Chapter III, where we will provide an in-depth analysis of the external factors.

Closure of Chapter I

This chapter has explored the types of consumer behaviour, along with the main psychological theories that try to explain why consumers, and human beings as a whole, behave the way they do. Additionally, it has also provided marketing concepts and knowledges relevant to contextualize the importance behind these theoretical frameworks. The broad vision we have gained will serve as a solid foundation for understanding the factors that affect consumer behaviour.

Although the main focus of the project is the external factors of the framework provided, the following chapter will do a quick overview of the **decision-making process** and **internal factors**.

CHAPTER II : The decision-making process and internal factors

The two chapters that follow will function as a groundwork to perform a practical analysis on Chapter IV. I have created this foundation relying on several books with a great understanding and expertise on the field, such as *Consumer Behavior: Building Marketing strategy* by Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, *Consumer Behavior & Marketing Strategy* by Peter and Olson, and *Consumer Behavior* by Hoyer et al. Once this basis is properly established, we will be able to expand the research with empirical evidence.

Despite the fact that this thesis has as a central theme the external factors influencing consumer behaviour, the relevance of the decision-making process and internal factors cannot be ignored. Given that it is an integrated model, it is important to consider all agents to understand the bigger picture of consumer behaviour. Therefore, this chapter will concisely explore both of these aspects.

1. The decision-making process

The concept of the *purchase decision* may evoke an image of rationality and objectiveness, however, some purchasing decisions are made due to emotions or feelings that arise from a certain product or brand. Despite the fact that acquisitions driven by rational thoughts and those motivated by emotions have different characteristics, the decision-making process model provides valuable insights into all types of consumer purchases (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

The traditional model of consumer decision-making process was first introduced in 1910 by John Dewey. This framework describes the five steps that buyers experience when buying a product or service (Stankevich, 2017).

Figure 5. Five-stage model of the consumer buying process.



Note. From *Journal of International Business Research and Marketing* by Alina Stankevich (2017)

The first step, need recognition, appears when consumers realize they lack or need something. According to Chapman (2025), problem recognition is the result of a discrepancy between a desired state and the current state. This ignites the decision process, which will be directly related to the problem's relevance, the situation, and how inconvenient this issue is for the subject.

Once a need has been developed, consumers will initiate an information search. This can be internal – long-term memory is used to establish whether a suitable solution is already known – or external – involves independent and personal sources, as well as marketing-controlled

sources (e.g. ads, banners...) – (Stankevich, 2017). With all these resources, consumers will define an *evoke set*, which determines all the brands or products they will consider to solve the aforementioned problem (Stankevich, 2017).

At the third stage, there will be an evaluation of alternatives. Consumers sometimes decide based on emotional connections or experiences, as well as in order to minimize effort or negative feelings. In these cases, there is little consideration about specific features or product characteristics (Stankevich, 2017). However, in the vast majority of scenarios, an *evaluative criteria* comes into play. Chapman (2025) understands evaluative criteria as the “various dimensions, features or benefits a consumer looks for in response to a specific problem”. For instance, the evaluative criteria of purchasing a computer might be cost, speed, memory, software, warranty... It is important to note that, even for the exact same product or service, two people can have extremely distinct evaluative criteria (Comegys et al., 2006). At a certain point, the buyer will make a decision and choose the final candidate.

Now, the consumer should actually purchase the product. Nevertheless, additional decisions need to be considered, such as when to buy, where to buy, or how much money to spend. As a consequence, there tends to be a time delay between the moment of decision and the purchase per se. For expensive and durable products like cars, computers... the lag time can extend throughout a quite long period of time. When it comes to nondurable products (e.g. everyday goods, grocery item, etc.) the time between decision and purchase is much shorter (Stankevich, 2017).

At last, consumers evaluate and review the product on the post-purchase stage. During and after the usage of the product or service, the buyer will have a perception of its performance. This can be either above the expected level, below the expected level, or at the expected level (Comegys et al., 2006). As the following picture indicates, the satisfaction degree of the consumer will be fundamentally based on the prior expectations.

Figure 6. Expectations, performance, and satisfaction.

Perceived Performance Relative to Expectation	Expectation Level	
	Below Minimum Desired Performance	Above Minimum Desired Performance
Better	Satisfaction*	Satisfaction/Commitment
Same	Nonsatisfaction	Satisfaction
Worse	Dissatisfaction	Dissatisfaction

Note. From *Consumer behavior: Building Marketing Strategy* by Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010)

* Assuming the performance still surpasses the minimum desired level.

According to A. Stankevich (2017), if the consumer deems the perceived performance as *satisfactory*, they will be likely to purchase the product again, and even vouch to their acquaintances (in the information search stage) about their positive experience. *Nonsatisfactory*, implies that the buyer is not outwardly disappointed, however, they may look for another option the next time the problem arises. Lastly, *dissatisfaction* will lead to the consumer changing brands and discouraging others from selecting this particular one. At the same time, this can also depend on the type of consumer buying behaviour the situation generates (See Chapter I, Consumer buying behaviour).

2. Internal factors

Internal factors influencing consumer behaviour are the personal and psychological factors that affect how individuals make decisions when purchasing products or services. These factors are inherent to each specific consumer, ergo, they can vary from person to person (Shaheed Mahendra Karma Vishwavidyalaya, n.d.). Internal influences depict the ways through which consumers interact with the universe and environment around them, identify their feelings, gather and examine information, develop morals and beliefs, and take actions according to those (UKEssays.com, n.d.).

Our framework determines as internal factors motivation, perception, and attitudes.

2.1 Motivation

Motivation is the reason for behaviour. The terms *need* and *motivation* are often used indistinguishably, given that when a consumer notices a gap between a desired state and current state, a need is recognised and transformed into a “motivation” (See Chapter I, Consumer decision making process) (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). In general, consumers can be motivated to engage in behaviours, decide, or process information. This motivation is related to important consumer decisions, primarily acquiring, using, and disposing of goods and services (Hoyer et. al., 2020) – Maslow’s hierarchy of needs is a theory that gives valuable insights with regards to this topic (See Chapter I, Malow’s hierarchy of needs).

Hoyer et al. (2020) state that, since motivation has the power to influence outcomes, it is important for marketers to understand what affects motivation; that way, they will be able to predict and somewhat control it. Motivation is affected when consumers regard something as: personally relevant, consistent with their values, needs, goals, emotions, and self-control processes, bearing on their needs, personally involving, satisfying goals and emotions, and moderately inconsistent with prior attitudes.

In order to showcase with a practical case how motivation can be used to a company’s advantage, Lake (2009) proposes the following example:

A fictitious company manufactures a product that targets men in their mid- to late-forties who are experiencing hair loss. The company realizes that the targeted men want to be perceived as attractive, nevertheless, they struggle with losing their hair at an early age. With this information

in mind, they decide not to use a traditional male model in the advertisement, but instead use someone similar to the men they are trying to appeal to. This allows potential consumers to experience what it would be like to use the product from a mainly egotistical point of view (i.e. attracting more attention, feeling desired...). The company, then, is able to create the illusion that the buyer's desire is fulfilled by using their product. They have developed a marketing concept that motivates its customers to both purchase the product, as well as to become loyal customers. In essence, the consumers are not really purchasing the hair product, but rather the concept of youth and attractiveness created by the marketing campaign.

2.2 Perception

Consumer perception can be defined as “the way in which information is acquired from the environment via the sense organs and then is transformed into experiences such as events, sounds, and tastes” (Ling et al., 2015).

Ling et al. (2015) state that perception is an approximation of reality. Our brains intend to make sense of the stimuli we are exposed to. We may mistake a friend for someone who is somewhat their height if they are far away, or we may purchase cereals quickly and end up with the wrong brand because the packaging looked similar. For marketers, the challenge is to capture the attention of possible customers and ensure that the information is accurately received and retained by them.

Perception holds critical implications for marketing strategies in numerous areas. In retail stores, shelf positioning and the amount of shelf space influences which items and brand will receive the most attention. Moreover, point-of-purchase displays also attract attention and boost sales. Cross-promoting complementary products has also proven to be effective (e.g. milk signage in the cookie aisle) (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Lately, retailers have found that consumer perceptions and sales tend to increase when there is a reduction in clutter that does not affect variety and choice (Boatwright & Nunes, 2001). Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010) add that, another important element of the retail environment, is ambient scent. Pleasant and likable smells in a retail stores can increase product evaluation and considerations by boosting positive emotions.

On the other hand, marketing and perception have another intersection in brand names and logos. Brand names can influence anything from colour preference to food taste. For instance, Mountain Dew's marketing direction attributed part of the Code Red's flavour success to its name, he stated that: “Had it been called ‘Mountain Dew Cherry’ it would've done very differently”. Furthermore, a study found that children enjoy the taste of foods such as carrots, milk, and apple juice more when it comes in a McDonald's package (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Sensory marketing is the process of systematically managing consumers' perceptions and experiences of marketing stimuli. Many companies seek to enhance consumer perception of marketing strategies by appealing to the five senses (Hoyer et al., 2020).

2.3 Attitudes

An attitude is an overall evaluation of how much does a person like or dislike an object, issue, person, or action (Petty et al., 1991). Attitudes are learned, most of them through classical conditioning (*See Chapter I, Classical conditioning*) and persist over time (Ling et al., 2015).

Attitudes are important because they: (1) guide our thoughts, (2) influence our feelings, and (3) affect our behaviour. We decide what to read, who to talk to, where to shop, based on our attitudes. At its time, attitudes influence behaviour in purchasing, consuming, and disposing a product or service. Consequently, marketers need to change attitudes in order to influence consumer decision making and consumer behaviour (Hoyer et al., 2020).

Attitudes have an affective and a cognitive component. The affective component refers mainly to emotional reactions. (Bodur et al., 2000). Conversely, according to Hoyer et al. (2020), cognitive components focus on how thoughts are related to attitudes. Changing attitudes can happen through influencing any of these components. For example, marketers can try to influence consumers' attitudes by appealing to the emotional experience of product usage (Goode et al., 2010). Subaru, a car manufacturer, for example, ran a commercial in the United States in which an anxious father is giving last minute instructions to her five-year-old daughter, who is about to drive by herself for the first time. Finally, as he hand her the keys the audience sees a teenage girl who is ready to drive alone. By portraying an emotional situation that many parents can relate to, Subaru highlighted and stressed the safety features of their cars along with specific benefits that buyers would appreciate (Gregory, 2010).

Attitudes can help companies gauge their acceptance in the marketplace. They reveal how well they are meeting the needs of consumers, as well as the perception of the logo, endorsers, products, or marketing messages (Lake, 2009). As potential predictors of behaviour, attitudes create the intentions of consumers (Ling et al., 2015).

Closure of Chapter II

This chapter has demonstrated the indispensable role that internal elements and the decision-making process play, and has provided a more comprehensive view of consumption patterns. This foundational understanding sets the stage for the following chapter, where the impact of external factors will be addressed in greater depth.

CHAPTER III: External factors

External factors refers to all physical and social characteristics of a consumer's external world that somehow impacts their decision-making process (Shaw, 2024). Each individual has a unique set of knowledges and beliefs that will dictate how they perceive and understand the environment (detailed in *Chapter II: Internal factors*), however, these external factors play an essential role in shaping the consumer's final choice (Peter & Olson, 2009).

According to Jisana (2014), external factors encompass: cultural, social, and personal factors. This chapter will be devoted to meticulously examining each of those, along with their subsections.

1. Cultural factors

Human behaviour is to a great extent the result of a learning process due to the socialization with key agents. From these, we develop a set of notions that will drive behavioural patterns (Ramya & Ali, 2016).

Following our framework, the agents within cultural factors are: culture, subculture, and social class.

1.1 Culture

Culture is defined as “a set of values, ideas, artifacts, and other meaningful symbols that help individuals communicate, interpret, and evaluate as members of a society” (Samli, 2012).

We tend to follow cultural norms without even noticing because it is what feels right and natural. For example, how far apart are two people when standing is rarely negotiated, it is imposed by each culture (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Cultures are not static, they are dynamic and evolve slowly over time. Marketing strategies, thus, need to be adjusted to changing cultures (Jenner et al., 2008).

Cultural meaning

Cultural meaning appears when many people in a social group share the same understanding of a concept. This is created among groups of people and can be influenced by the government, religion, educational organizations, or businesses (Peter & Olson, 2009).

According to the cultural meaning model, in highly developed consumer societies, cultural meaning is present in products and services, individual consumers, and in environments (McCracken, 1986).

Given the nature of this project, we will focus on moving cultural meanings into products.

Moving cultural meanings into products

Advertising has been the most studied manner of transferring cultural meaning into products (McCracken, 1986). Advertisers need to decide which cultural meanings they want their products or services to convey, and create ads that properly do so. Often, the best way is using symbols (Durgee & Stuart, 1987). A *symbol* is an element within a culture that represents shared meanings, values, and beliefs among the members of a group. It is important to note that symbols have different significances across cultures. For instance, a flag may evoke patriotism in one context but represent oppression in another (Wagner, 2021). In accordance with Peter & Olson (2009), advertisers regularly use symbols in marketing products. As an example, the Chevrolet campaign “Heartbeat of America” showed symbols of small-town American life to represent traditional American values (e.g. family, patriotism, friendship).

Another effective marketing strategy within advertising is celebrity endorsements. From a cultural perspective, celebrities are cultural objects with specific cultural meanings. Celebrity endorsements are a useful way to personify a brand since their characteristics and meanings can be transferred to the product or service (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). When developing a celebrity endorsement strategy, marketers must be careful to choose a public person who has a meaning consistent with the whole marketing strategy. Musicians who have distinctive cultural images based on their records, performances, appearances, and overall persona enhance their appeal as spokespersons (Peter & Olson, 2009). An example of a musician celebrity endorsement is Taylor Swift’s partnership with Coca-Cola to promote Diet Coke. This collaboration aimed to appeal to a younger demographic using Swift’s widespread appeal, especially on new generations (Ian, 2025). When it comes to actors, it is more effective to cast those who tend to play similar roles in all their projects, as they have a more solid and stable cultural meaning. Actress Meryl Streep, for instance, may not be as desirable. Given that she has played a vast variety of characters (from *Donna Sheridan* in *Mamma Mia* to *Miranda Priestly* in *Devil Wears Prada*), she does not have a clear set of cultural meanings (Peter & Olson, 2009). Celebrities represent important cultural meanings that consumers may find relevant. By purchasing and using the product endorsed, buyers can obtain those meanings (McCracken, 1989).

Aside from advertising, other marketing strategies are involved in the process of moving cultural meaning into products, such as pricing strategies. For many buyers, higher prices have desirable cultural meanings related with wealth and prestige: creating a high-status, high-quality image. Different price endings can transmit this message (e.g. price being 15,00€ instead of 14,99€) (Schindler, 1991). This type of consumer behaviour can be directly connected with the Veblenian model (see Chapter I, *Conspicuous consumption model*).

The product itself can also communicate important cultural meanings. For example, the design of the interior of a car (leather versus cloth seats, wood versus plastic dash...) along with the look and feeling of the controls can transfer a certain message. Even distribution strategies

could do so. The limited distribution and in-store availability of Burberry products stresses a high-end image (Peter & Olson, 2009).

Cross-cultural marketing strategies

Cross-cultural differences in languages and meanings can strongly influence the success of a marketing strategy. Marketers must deeply comprehend the cultural values of all the countries they act in. A failure to understand cultural differences can cause negative consequences, such as the following (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010):

“The brand Lipton created a line of instant meals called “Side Dishes”. These sold well in the United States, but not in Latin America. Lipton had a large market base there, and was hoping to enlarge it with Side Dishes. The problem was that Latin American housewives, with more conservative views on family roles, thought that instant meals reflected that they were lazy or did not really care about their family” (White, 2002).

Peter & Olson (2009), state that although differences in cultures are an objective fact, and sometimes obvious, marketers do not agree on how to treat them. There are three approaches when it comes to them: adaptation, standardization, and changing the culture.

Adapting strategy to culture

Adaptation is the process of adjusting a company’s goods or services to respond to specific needs, tastes, or expectations from different groups of consumers (Albrecht et al., 2023).

Albrecht et al. (2023) differentiate two steps in an adaptation approach. The first is figuring out what has to be changed to make an offering more appealing to the targeted audience. The second is implementing the adjustments into practices in accordance with the organization’s capabilities and resources. The marketing strategy should be tailored to fit the specific values and behaviours of the culture.

The adaptation approach advocates for changing the product, promotion mix, or any additional aspect of the marketing strategy in order to appeal to local cultures. McDonalds’s used to strive for uniformity, but now adapts both their products and store layout. For instance, in Japan they add fried eggs to burgers, in Thailand they offer pork burgers with barbecue sauce, and in India the menu features lamb burgers instead of beef. Regarding the store display, a great example is the separate sections (family section and single section for men only) they have offered in Muslim countries to accommodate the cultural norms regarding interactions between men and women (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Figure 7. McDonald's store layout in Muslim countries.



Note. From *Consumer behavior: Building Marketing Strategy* by Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010)

Standardizing strategy across cultures

Standardization implies an undifferentiated use of the same marketing strategies across cultures. In this case, the firm simply replicates, without any changes, the same strategy in the different markets in which it operates (Sramkowski, 2021).

Levitt (1983) defends that standardization is increasingly making more sense due to globalization – increasing world travel and worldwide telecommunications –. Consumers nowadays think, and consequently shop, similarly. Tastes and preferences in different cultures are becoming quite homogeneous. Therefore, having the same brand name or marketing strategy can be successful in many cases.

The main advantage of standardization over adaptation, is its lower cost when it comes to economies of scale (Sramkowski, 2021). Peter & Olson (2009) reveal that executives at Coca-Cola estimated that they save more than \$8 million a year in the cost of thinking and creating specific imagery for different countries. Moreover, Texas Instruments using the same advertisements throughout all Europe rather than having one per country, estimated to have saved about \$30,000 per commercial.

Changing the culture

The third and final approach suggests that marketing strategies can be elaborated and applied to influence the culture. Marketing does not only adapt to consumers' culture and values, but is also able to take an active role in the cultural process (McCracken, 1986).

To exemplify this approach, a long-run strategy that intended to change cultural values and behaviours was Nestlé's. Nestlé marketed their products to convince mothers in Third World countries to shift from breast-feeding to using their baby formula product. The campaign was actually very successful in convincing parents that breast-feeding was not as healthy, and managed to change their feeding practices. Unfortunately, due to poor water quality and

improper formula preparation, children mortality rates increased. As a result, mothers switched back to breast-feeding for their children’s sake. Nestlé managed to change cultural preferences (which afterwards changed back), in a relatively short period (Peter & Olson, 2009).

1.2 Subculture

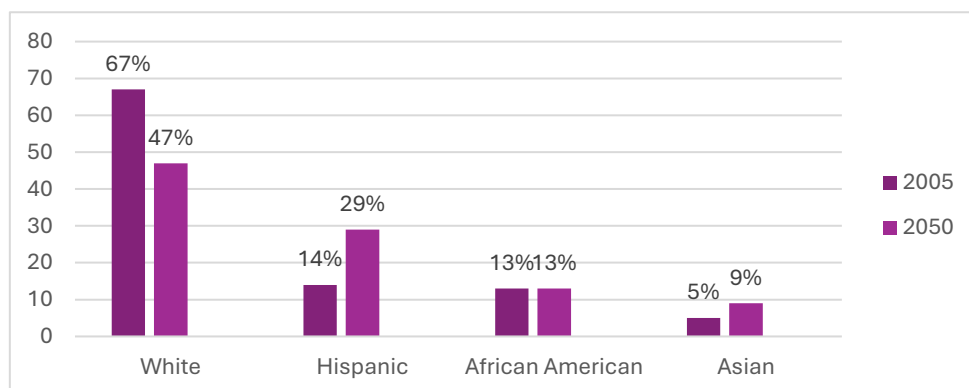
A subculture is a “segment of a larger culture whose members share distinguishing values and patterns of behaviour”. Subculture members are part of a larger culture, and generally share beliefs and attitudes with the core culture. The degree to which a person behaves in a unique way due to the subculture depends on whether they feel represented and identified by it (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

According to Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010), ethnic groups are the most commonly described subcultures, but there are others as well such as religion, income level, nationality... Due to its higher importance, we will only focus on **ethnic subcultures**.

Ethnic subcultures are distinct, smaller groups within a larger societal context that share unique shared norms, values, symbols, and lifestyles based on a common racial, language, or national background (*Socratica*, n.d.). It is critical to remember that all subcultures are diverse, and general descriptions do not apply to all the members of it (Oswald, 1999). Moreover, ethnicity is only one of the many factors that influence consumer behaviour. For example, a 45-year-old black doctor and a 45-year-old white doctor with the same annual income will probably have more consumption behaviours in common that they would with members of their own ethnicity but with much lower salaries (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Because of the broad number of ethnicities, we will examine the main groups in the United States except White Americans, since they represent the dominant culture and we intend to understand unique consumption patterns. The three major ethnic groups in the United States from 2005 to 2050 are: African American, Hispanic, and Asian (Passel & Cohn, 2008).

Figure 8. Population by ethnicity 2005 versus 2050 (estimated).



Note. Author’s own elaboration from *U.S. Population Projections: 2005–2050* by Passel & Cohn (2008)

African Americans

Marketing to African Americans must be based on the same directives as marketing to any other group. Sometimes, the African American market will require a unique product, other times a shift in the packaging or advertisement, and others, no change will be necessary (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Increasingly, marketers are targeting African Americans with special products. In accordance to Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010), cosmetics and similar goods usually need to be expressly designed for black consumers, given that their skin tones and hair differ from white buyers. For instance, L'Oréal created a product line (SoftSheen-Carson) to serve African American women in this market. Furthermore, companies like Mattel have created dolls with skin tones, hairstyles, and facial features that reflect the diversity of black women (Peter & Olson, 2009).

A common mistake when communicating with any ethnic group, is assuming that its members are the same as the larger culture except superficial differences. Failure to acknowledge this can lead to advertisements that just place the regular commercial in African American media or replace the actors without adapting the script. For instance, Greyhound Bus situated their standard ad on black radio stations. Nevertheless, they did not consider that the sound track for the commercial was country music, which is typically not well-loved by most black audiences. The degree to which messages should differ needs to be catered to the specific situation and circumstances (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

In order to serve to African American consumers' needs, retailers frequently modify their merchandising mix. JCPenney saw great success with its Authentic African boutiques located close to significant African American communities. These small shops, found inside JCPenney stores, sold clothing and accessories imported from Africa (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Hispanics

The Bureau of Census defines Hispanic as "a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin regardless of race" (US Census Bureau, 2024).

Successfully engaging with Hispanic consumers implies more than simply directly translating from English to Spanish, it requires a careful analysis of consumers (Peter & Olson, 2009). For example, when Mattel launched BaribeLatina.com, it was not just a translation of the English site Barbie.com. Mattel noticed that although both Hispanic and non-Hispanic girls tend to be influenced by society to exhibit nurturing behaviours, Hispanic girls had less interest in games and more in activity-based play. Therefore, the content of the webpages reflected these differences (Taylor, 2001). Another successful example is the advertisement of Sear. In the English commercial a husband and wife were the ones selecting furniture; nonetheless, in the Spanish ad, a teenage daughter and their grandparents joined them, showcasing the importance of

extended family (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). The other side of the coin is exemplified by the following telephone company, according to Peter & Olson (2009). They tried to target the Hispanic market by hiring Puerto Rican actors. In the ad, the wife told her husband: “Run downstairs and phone Mary. Tell her we’ll be a little late.” This ignored both marital roles within Hispanic relationships – wives seldom order their husbands around –, and Hispanic behaviours – being late is expected –.

Few marketers have historically created unique products or services for the Hispanic market. That is changing, though, considering the market’s size and expansion. Wal-Mart made Denver Bronco T-shirts specifically for Hispanic customers in Colorado. This version had the phrase “De todo corazón”, as the company intended to incorporate Hispanic cultural emblems with American sports traditions. The T-shirt became the most popular merchandise of the season (Garcia & Gerdes, 2004).

Asian Americans

There are several Asian American markets, based on nationality and language. Thus, targeted nationalities can be reached efficiently with native-language commercials. As we have previously seen, this requires infusing ads with cultural symbols and relevant meanings. An outstanding example of this could be found in a Los Angeles franchise. They selected four outlets with large numbers of Chinese and Vietnamese customers. The store aired advertisements and gave coupons for free moon cakes and lanterns at the time of the Moon Festival, a significant celebration in many Asian countries. Sales increased by 30% in these stores during the promotion (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

The success of many items depends on an understanding on how Asian American consumers make judgements about what to buy. According to a study, Asian consumers’ decision-making process is heavily influenced by their country of origin. For example, women in Japanese households typically have more influence over their husbands, but Vietnamese Americans rely more on the man to decide over large purchases (Peter & Olson, 2009).

1.3 Social class

Social class refers to a “status hierarchy by which groups and individuals are categorized on the basis of esteem and prestige” (Peter & Olson, 2009).

Hoyer et al. (2020) establishes three social class groups to be used for consumer analysis:

- The *upper class* of most societies is a mixed groups of individuals including aristocracy, those who have inherited wealth, the new social elite, and the upper-middle class.
- The *middle class* consists basically of white-collar workers, most of which have attended university. This class is exponentially growing in some nations, such as India, Brazil, China...

- The *working class* is mainly represented by blue-collar workers. They tend to heavily rely on family members for economic and social support.

Social class identification is primarily impacted by education and occupation. However, other factors have an influence as well such as social skills, family history, recreational habits, etc. (Peter & Olson, 2009). Social class structures are important since they strongly affect behaviour. People are more likely to be influenced by individuals in their own social class rather than by those in other classes (Allen & Anderson, 1994).

Social class can determine what consumers find desirable. Many upper-class consumers prefer high-end cars, imported wines, fancy restaurants... to satisfy their need for prestige and luxury. On the other hand, working class consumers will gravitate towards good quality at a cheap price (e.g. buffet restaurants, basic versions of branded products) (Hoyer et al., 2020).

As a result, marketers develop different product lines for different classes. For example, the corporate group Protector & Gamble targets higher-class consumers with anti-ageing Olay face creams with prices close to 50€, and lower-class buyers with 6€ skin moisturisers (Prior & Nagel, 2011). Likewise, Team (2021) declares that Toyota uses the Toyota and Lexus brands for different market segments. Toyota attracts value-conscious drivers (middle / working class), whereas Lexus aims for people looking for luxury and premium quality (upper class).

Marketers intending to reach upper-class consumers can offer products through channels that sell exclusive merchandise with personalised service (Rich & Jain, 1968). In this case, conspicuous consumption (*see Chapter I, Conspicuous consumption model*) plays crucial role when consumers want to purchase goods in the allegedly “correct” store, especially if they desire being seen doing so (Page, 1992). On other side of the picture, Hoyer et al. (2020) describe the example of New Zealand’s grocery retailer Pak’nSave. Their strategy is to draw customers from the lower and middle classes, claiming that their policy is to always have “New Zealand’s lowest food prices”.

2. Social factors

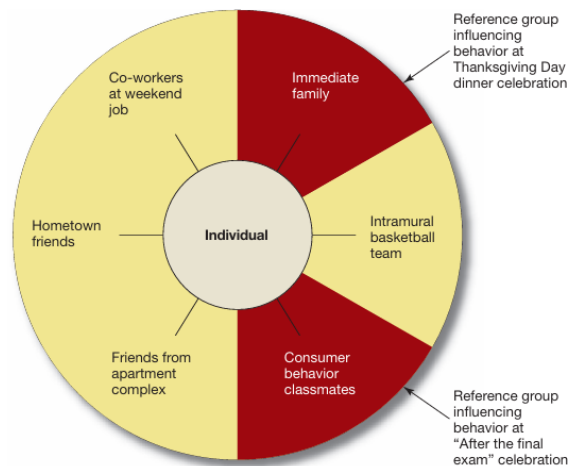
All individuals are social beings. Bhukya and Paul (2023) assert that an individual’s behavioural actions and reactions are often times influenced by social contacts and interactions with other members of the community. This occurrence is applicable to pretty much all consumers. Their purchasing and consumption habits are significantly determined by interactions with the social environment. Marketers can leverage a larger portion of consumers’ purchases by having a thorough understanding of social factors.

According to our model of consumer behaviour, social factors are explained through reference groups, and household and family.

2.1 Reference groups

A reference group is “an actual or imaginary individual or group conceived of having significant relevance upon an individual’s evaluations, aspirations, or behaviour” (Park & Lessig, 1977). People may belong to many different groups simultaneously, however they tend to use one of them as the primary point of reference – which will vary with the specific situation (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). This idea is illustrated in *Figure 11*.

Figure 9. Reference groups change along with the situation.



Note. From *Consumer behavior: Building Marketing Strategy* by Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010)

Peter & Olson (2009) specify that reference groups may be from the same or other social classes, subcultures, and cultures. It is important to note, though, that in more Western cultures, reference groups have a greater impact on individuals’ consumption and behaviour patterns (Samli, 2012).

Reference groups can be classified depending on their type, or depending on the influence they exert over the consumer. The three types of reference groups are: *associative*, *aspirational*, and *dissociative* (Hoyer et al., 2020).

Types of reference groups

Associative reference groups are those to which we currently belong to, such as a group of friends or a school club (Hoyer et al., 2020). Even consumer who like to perceive themselves as independent and individual-minded react positively to products linked to their associate group (Escalas & Bettman, 2005). Nevertheless, when consumers misunderstand their position within an associative reference group, they may make poor consumption choices. For instance, if one believes they are the best cyclist of their class, when they are barely beginners, they are likely to purchase equipment unsuited for their capabilities (Gershoff & Burson, 2011). Associative reference groups can form around a brand, which would be the case of the Harley Owners Groups (Hoyer et al., 2020). A brand community, according to Fournier and Lee (2009), is as an

enthusiastic group of consumers aligning with the brand's character, personality, and activities. Members of a brand community buy the product repeatedly – they are extremely committed to it –, share their information and enthusiasm with others, and encourage members to remain loyal (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2006).

On the other hand, aspirational reference groups are those we admire and wish to be like but of which we are currently not members (Ling et al., 2015). For example, a younger brother may strive to be like his older siblings (Hoyer et al., 2020).

Lastly, dissociative reference groups are those which embody negative meanings and serve as a point of reference of aspects people want to avoid (Peter & Olson, 2009). These can oscillate from a religious group or a political party, to ex-partners or relatives (Ling et al., 2015). Many buyers may find it difficult to express what they want, whereas they can quite clearly express what they do not. In fact, some researchers suggest that distaste is much more decisive when it comes to consumption choices (Solomon, 2006).

The types of reference groups are useful when it comes to marketing to properly depict and target the consumer. Ads should accurately reflect the clothing, hairstyles, accessories, and overall demeanour of their associative reference group – e.g. using actual skateboarders, or people who play the part to sell skateboards (Englis & Solomon, 1995). On the opposite side of the spectrum, companies should not use dissociative reference groups in their marketing. Abercrombie & Fitch went so far to even offer to pay the stars of the controversial American reality show, “Jersey Shore”, to not wear their clothing. They stated that the show was contrary to the values their brand upheld, which could be distressing to Abercrombie & Fitch's fans, therefore they wanted to erase all possible association between them (Holmes, 2011).

Types of reference groups influence

People choose to associate and identify with a specific reference group for three reasons: to obtain information, to reap benefits or evade penalties, and to acquire meanings for their self-concepts. These categories mirror the three types of reference group influence: *informational, normative, and identification* (Peter & Olson, 2009).

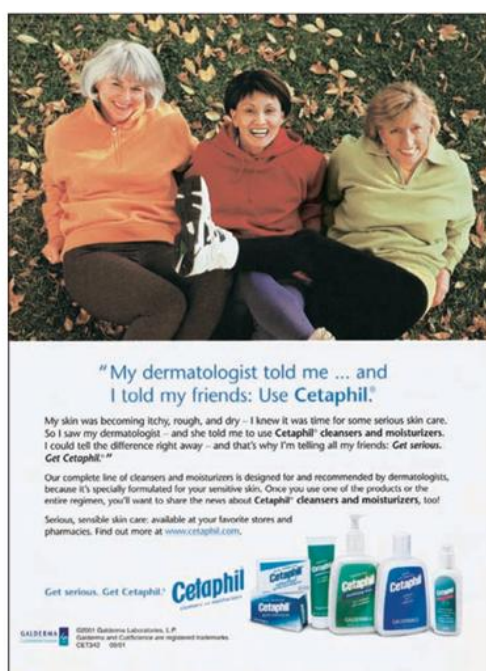
Deutsch & Gerard (1995), affirm that informational influence conveys useful information to consumers to help them make decisions. This information can be transmitted directly or indirectly. For instance, a person trying to decide on running shoes might seek the advice of a friend expert on the sport. However, the same information could be obtained indirectly by vicarious observation. The same person may carefully note the type of shoes professional runners have and purchase them (Peter & Olson, 2009). Consumers tend to be more influenced by reference groups if the information is perceived as reliable and the information source is deemed trustworthy (Park & Lessig, 1977).

Normative influence, sometimes called *utilitarian* influence, is the “social pressure designed to encourage conformity to the expectations of others” (Cousineau, 1975). Normative influence implies that consumers will be somehow punished or sanctioned for not following the rules, just as it implies that they will be rewarded for behaving as expected (Hoyer et al., 2020). This type of influence is strongest when there are strong ties among individuals and the product involved has two main features: not a necessity and consumed in public (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

At last, identification influence, also known as *value-expressive* influence, appears when individuals have internalized the group’s values and norms. They have accepted them as their own – the consumer behaves in a manner similar to the group as they have the same values (Peter & Olson, 2009).

Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010) determine that all three types of reference groups influence marketing advertisements. Informational influence ads use experts (e.g. dentists, doctors, teachers, etc) as the information agent. An example of this is *Figure 12*. Normative group influence has been less and less portrayed as years pass by, given that could be interpreted as unethical. Advertisements implying that someone’s friends would base their opinions on them depending on their purchases were criticized for enhancing people’s insecurities. Lastly, the foundation of identification influence is the individual’s internalization of the attitudes and ideals of the group. The goal of advertising is to show that the product aligns with the beliefs of the group and, consequently, of the individual. This frequently entails showcasing the brand’s usage by a specific demographic – the associative reference group.

Figure 10. Informational influence advertisement.



Note. From *Consumer behavior: Building Marketing Strategy* by Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010)

2.2 Family and household

A household is the basic consumption unit for most consumer goods, such as housing, automobiles, or appliances. The importance of family household also relies on the fact that it acts as the primary mechanism in which cultural and subcultural values and behavioural patterns are transmitted to the next generation. Buying and consumption patterns are heavily influenced by the family household unit (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Changing trends in household structure

Nowadays, households follow complex and diverse cycles (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Many cultural and social changes have occurred in the last few decades that have influence family structures in aspects such as delayed children, dual-career families, divorce, or same-sex families. Often, this represents new opportunities for marketers, such as the subsequent (Solomon, 2006).

In two-income families, both partners have a great influence over household acquisition and consumption decisions. Therefore, marketers of more expensive items must appeal to both (Commuri & Gentry, 2005). Non-traditional families are also being targeted. For instance, Hallmark offers greeting cards that addresses this type of blended families without mentioning the word “step” (e.g. stepmom, stepdad, stepsister) (Hoyer et al., 2020). Single people are also attractive from a marketing perspective. As reported by Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010), given that they lack some of the burden children bear, they are an excellent market for a wide array of recreational and leisure-related items. In the United States, some stores in the Trader Joe’s grocery chain even designate a special “Singles Night” to appeal to this public. Lastly, marketers are targeting same-sex couples through sponsoring pride events and creating ads which enhance their representation in more mainstream media, like TV advertisements or billboards (Hoyer et al., 2020). In addition, companies should be aware that the dynamics in homosexual relationships differ from heterosexual ones, and adapt to them; for example, purchasing decisions by lesbian couples tend to be a more egalitarian process than decisions made in husband- or wife-dominated households (Wilkes & Laverie, 2007).

Family decision making

Marketers are highly interested in family decision making: how family members interact and influence each other when making buying choices for the household (Gupta et al., 1983). The decision to comply to a child’s request, purchasing a toy or school clothes is not merely an acquisition, it is a symbol of love and care (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

According to research, family members may adopt different roles and behave in various ways while making decisions and purchases (Rosen & Granbois, 1983). For instance, the person who buys ingredients for a sandwich (the mother) may not be the same person who prepares it (the

father), nor the same one who eats it (the kid). Marketers must determine which family member assumes which responsibility so as to completely comprehend family decision-making (Peter & Olson, 2009). Hoyer et al. (2020) include among the decision-making roles the following:

- a) *Gatekeepers* control and collect the flow of information important to the decision.
- b) *Influencers* provide information to other family members with the intention to influence the final decision.
- b) *Deciders* have the power to determine whether to purchase a product and service, and which one will be chosen.
- c) *Buyers* actually purchase the product or service.
- d) *Users* consume or use the product or service.

Each role can be performed by different household members, by a single individual, or by the entire household (Hoyer et al., 2020).

Marketing to children

Children are a large and growing market, given that brand loyalties developed at this age may sustain for large periods of time (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Moreover, they play an important role in household decisions by trying to influence their parents' acquisition, usage, and disposition behaviour (Hoyer et al., 2020). Thus, marketers should determine which family members are involved in the purchase and appeal to all parties (Hoyer et al., 2020). Companies such as Kmart Australia have embraced this perspective and now target families as a whole, more particularly two important groups: moms and kids (Reynolds, 2017).

However, Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010) reveal that it is important to note that there are several ethical concerns with marketing to children. These worries are mostly caused by younger children's insufficient capacity to process information and make well-informed choices about what to buy. Additionally, there are concerns that marketing initiatives, especially in advertising, lead to unhealthy habits, such as family conflict, improper diets, and undesirable values.

3. Personal factors

The consumers' personal characteristics have an influence over their consumer behaviour, as each individual is unique by nature and these personal factors have a direct influence on their buying decisions (Rehman et al., 2017).

The personal factors we will focus on, as reported by our model, are: age, lifestyle, and personality.

3.1 Age

Age carries behavioural and attitudinal norms (Alreck, 2000). For this reason, a consumer's age exerts a significant influence on their identity – it shapes which media to choose, where to shop, how to use products, and how to think and feel about marketing activities (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Teenagers (Generation Z – Millennials)

According to Solomon (2006), current teenagers or young adults use products to express their identities and explore the world and their new-found freedom. Teenagers in Europe have increased their media consumption habits, i.e., they are more advertising-literate. As a consequence, the messages must be seen as truly authentic and not condescending.

Research shows that consumers can recall brand names they learned early in life more quickly and effortlessly than those learned later. In order to ensure that brand loyalty continues into adulthood, marketers seek to increase teens' early brand awareness and preference (Hoyer et al., 2020). Dwyer (1994) reports that 50% of female teens have already developed cosmetic brand loyalties by the age of fifteen. Victoria's Secret, for instance, tried to appeal to teenagers by launching a new ad campaign featuring colourful lingerie, backpacks, and T-shirts (Lutz, 2013).

Hoyer et al. (2020) state that, given that teens can be trendsetters, especially in fashion and music, companies like Coca-Cola and Pepsi are constantly analysing their preferences. For example, Teen Vogue positions itself as the source for style news and guidance featuring brands such as GUESS. However, it is important to note that teen tastes can shift quickly, and popular products or stores may become overexposed and lose their appeal.

Adults (Baby Boomers)

This new generation of adults is characterized by higher educational levels, higher income than their parents, as well as dual-career households (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Some firms are developing offerings particularly for the needs of baby boomers. For example, apparel marketers have created jeans larger in sizes and with different styles to accommodate to them – in the United States, the Chico's chain grew more than 600 stores by specialising in loose-fitting casual clothing for baby boomer women (The Economist, 2011). Furthermore, marketers need to take into account the fact that baby boomers are considered “flat agers”, meaning that they refuse to be defined or limited by their age. This encouraged the luxury brand Yves Saint Laurent to sell their face cream as a “renaissance treatment” rather than an anti-ageing product (Han, 2015).

Seniors (Silent Generation)

In 2010, 20% of Europeans were 62 or older. Most elderly people lead a quite active, multidimensional life, due partially to the fact that they are no longer burdened with some of the financial obligations that drain the income of younger consumers (Solomon, 2006).

As with other groups, marketers need to carefully research seniors' needs and preferences. In Japan, for instance, Ueshima coffee shops cater to older consumers by having wider aisles, lower tables, and menus with a larger type font (Hoyer et al., 2020). Additionally, the older generation deeply values and appreciates a proper customer service, in fact, many develop brand loyalty due to this service. (John & Cole, 1986).

3.2 Personality

Personality is “an individual’s characteristic response tendency across similar situations”. Usually, consumers choose products that fit their personality. For instance, a shy person may not feel comfortable driving an ostentatious car because it is not reflective of their persona. However, there may be times in which a shy person would, in fact, drive a flashy car, as a way to overcompensate for an area of themselves they feel insecure about. Products and brands help consumers express their personality (Hawkings & Mothersbaugh, 2010).

Personality is important in consumer behaviour, given that it shapes how consumers may generally react to marketing and communication campaigns such as advertising, product offers, salespeople, merchandise displays... (Ling et al., 2015). Consequently, marketers can develop offerings and communications that appeal to specific personality types. Ads targeting consumers who are compliant and heavily rely on others' opinions focus on the approval of others. On the other hand, ads and promotions appealing to those customers with a need to be different and unique, might focus on messages suggesting that a certain product will set them apart from the rest (Hoyer et al., 2020).

Brand personality

Hawkings & Mothersbaugh (2010), affirm that consumers' personality is not the only one that should be taken into account: brands have personalities as well. Brand personality is the way a brand is personified by associating to it a set of human characteristics and traits (Paul, 2024). For example, Jaguar and Reebok are currently trying to enhance their brand personalities to better target customers. Jaguar want to be less “aloof”, whereas Reebok wants to be “hip and aggressive” (Hawkings & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Research has shown that consumer relationships with “sincere” brands found to deepen with time, similar to a real friendship. Alternatively, consumer relationships with “exciting” brands tended to weaken over time, along the lines of a “short-lived fling”. The advantage “sincere” brands possess, though, needs to be backed up by a consistent high quality (Aaker et al., 2004).

An example of a brand that has attentively curated their brand personality is Bourjois, a French cosmetics company. They have created unique make-up sets that communicate different personalities. They used various cocktails, holiday destinations, and fashion items to attribute each set a distinguished personality. For one of those sets they used the martini with the name “Fabulous Flirtini” (Hawkings & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Their strategy was to:

“Offer several different color stories with the same theme to capture as many consumers as possible and to promote a range of personalities to connect with a range of consumers. At the same time, the sets reflected the core attributes of Bourjois: profusion of color, joy de vivre, whimsy, sassy, and fun.” (Hawkings & Mothersbaugh, 2010)

3.3 Lifestyles

Lifestyle is defined as someone’s way of living – the things that a person or particular group of people usually do (Lifestyle, 2025). Many of the factors previously discussed, such as social class, serve as foundational component in shaping a unique lifestyle (Solomon, 2006).

According to Hawkins & Mothersbaugh (2010), consumers are rarely explicitly aware of how lifestyle influence their buying choices. For instance, few individuals would think “I’ll buy a Starbucks at one of their stores to support my lifestyle.” Nonetheless, those who lead an active, social lifestyle may choose Starbucks partly due to its convenience, trendy reputation, and the social atmosphere present in its outlets. Therefore, lifestyle often serves as the underlying motivation and framework for purchasing decisions.

What individuals do during their free time often serves as a strong indicator of their lifestyle. One consumer may enjoy outdoor activities like skiing, while another might prefer browsing the Internet. Consumers who engage in different activities and hold different opinions and interests can represent distinct lifestyle segments for marketers (Hoyer et al., 2020). For example, one lifestyle segment includes those who have a fondness for nostalgia or a longing for things from the past. This segment clearly represents an important market for vintage films, literature, and antiques (Holbrook, 1993).

Lifestyle research can help marketers understand how a product fits into consumers’ general behaviour patterns (Hoyer et al., 2020). For example, dual-career couples and other customers with hectic schedules especially value daycare facilities and similar services (Berry et al., 2002). According to Hoyer et al. (2020), marketers also monitor lifestyles to identity new opportunities. For instance, a Japanese business realized that a large portion of its clientele were frequent travelers who enjoy trying local cuisine. To address this demand, the company created a smartphone app that can quickly translate any Chinese or English restaurant menu into Japanese.

It's crucial to recognize that consumers from various countries often exhibit distinct lifestyles. For example, in contrast to American women, Japanese women tend to be more centered around

home life, exhibit less sensitivity to pricing, and are less inclined to drive. Considering these tendencies, Japanese women are likely to dedicate more time to cooking at home than U.S. women and would, consequently, be willing to spend more on items that improve meal quality (Onkvisit & Shaw, 2004). Still, there have been several attempts to create a cross-cultural model to measure and determine lifestyles. Roper Starch Worldwide, a market research company, conducted a large multinational survey and found six global lifestyles: strivers, devouts, altruists, fun seekers, and creatives (Elliott, 1998). The following figure briefly explains each of them.

Figure 11. Cross-cultural model of lifestyles.

Strivers (23 percent)—value material and professional goals and are driven by wealth, status, and power. They like computers and cell phones but have little time for media beyond newspapers. Middle aged, and skewing male, Strivers are found disproportionately (33 percent) in Asia.

Devouts (22 percent)—value duty, tradition, faith, obedience, and respect for elders. They are the least media involved and least interested in Western brands. Skewing female, Devouts are most common in developing Asia (e.g., Philippines), Africa, and the Middle East and least common in developed Asia (e.g., Japan) and Western Europe.

Altruists (18 percent)—are interested in social issues and the welfare of society. They are well educated and older with a median age of 44. Skewing female, Altruists are most common in Latin America and Russia.

Intimates (15 percent)—value close personal relationships and family. They are heavy users of broadcast media, enjoy cooking and gardening, and are good targets for familiar consumer brands. Gender balanced, Intimates are more common in Europe and the United States (25 percent) and less common in developing Asia (7 percent).

Fun Seekers (12 percent)—value adventure, pleasure, and excitement. They are heavy users of electronic media, are fashion conscious, and like going to restaurants, bars, and clubs. Fun Seekers are the youngest, the most global in their lifestyles, roughly gender balanced, and more common in developed Asia.

Creatives (10 percent)—are interested in knowledge, education, and technology. They are the heaviest users of media, particularly books, magazines, and newspapers. They also lead the way in technology, including owning a computer and surfing the net. Gender balanced, Creatives are more common in Latin America and Western Europe.

Note. From *Consumer behavior: Building Marketing Strategy* by Hawkins, D. I., & Mothersbaugh, D. L. (2010)

Closure of Chapter III

Understanding consumer behaviour requires a holistic view of the multiple forces that shape individuals' purchasing decisions. In this chapter we have explored the cultural, social, and personal factors that influence how, why, and what consumers buy.

Collectively, these three dimensions reveal that consumer behaviour is a complex outcome of cultural contexts, social environments, and individual traits. Recognising and integrating these factors is vital for effectively creating and operating marketing strategies.

CHAPTER IV: A cross-cultural practical analysis

In order to prove the verity and the accuracy of the hypotheses, a practical analysis will be now performed. This study is classified in a literature review, a series of interviews with field experts, and a survey. The auxiliary hypotheses studied are the following:

H₂ = In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups.

H₃ = In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles.

1. International comparison between culture and reference groups

1.1 Literature review

To identify relevant literature, a systematic research was undertaken via Web of Science and Scopus. The key words used were “consumer behaviour”, “culture”, and “reference group” as title, and “marketing” as topic. A total of 103 articles were initially found. After discarding 3 articles due to duplication, 85 were additionally excluded because of the title or abstract. Out of the 15 left, ultimately, 9 were selected to make up the subsequent scoping review. A table with the inclusion and exclusion criteria, along with a diagram depicting the number of records can be found in the *Appendix*.

According to Yuan (2011), culture plays a major role in shaping consumer behaviour, offering key marketing implications to managers. Their study stresses its importance by comparing consumers in East Asia (represented by China and Korea) and Eastern Europe (represented by Russia and Uzbekistan). Consumers in East Asia gravitate more towards hedonic products that symbolize status, whereas those in Eastern Europe prefer functional products in accordance to their own preferences and needs. Moreover, East Asian consumers display greater brand loyalty.

Complementing this cultural perspective, Sharma et. al. (2006) demonstrate how culture shapes consumer attitudes among Singapore and Hong Kong residents. Although both regions share a common culture, there are distinctions in their buying behaviours due to the exposure of other cultures Singapore has been subjected to. This is exteriorized as Hong Kong consumers being more traditional and conservative in their purchases. Additionally, while Chinese consumers prioritize experiential image when shopping, for Korean consumers it is the social image along with product quality. The author suggests that cultural values interact with other factors, questioning culture as the sole determinant of consumer behaviour.

Gentina et. al. (2013) further explores cultural differences by studying how French and American teenagers satisfy their social belonging needs through fashion. French teenagers are

drawn to group identity and social connection, whereas American teenagers opt for individuality and uniqueness. Despite these cultural differences, both groups are influenced by peer approval, introducing the importance of reference groups, even when culture differs.

Yang et. al. (2007) offer a cross-cultural perspective on reference group influence, combining both concepts. Their research shows that in China, consumers are more likely to conform to group norms, boosting their relevance. Conversely, U.S. consumers are more bound to functional features such as price or utility, though still influenced by others' opinions. This proposes that even though culture heavily determines the framework, reference groups can greatly alter it.

Turčínková and Moisidis (2014) pick up the idea of reference groups' importance highlighting aspirational reference groups. These are particularly relevant in the first phase of purchase decision-making process – their study reveals that buyers often initiate a buying process after they find their friends' clothing cool or attractive.

Escalas and Bettman (2003) ratify the power of reference groups, explaining that consumers use others to evaluate their beliefs about the world. Brands associated with reference groups tend to enjoy greater loyalty from their consumers, showcasing that social alignment can be more compelling than economic benefits such as price cuts and coupons.

Zirena-Bejarano and Zirena (2024) continue this position by noting that the recommendations from friends and other influence groups with similar purchasing experiences can be an important bias for potential buyers. They state that companies should pay close attention to the influence of reference groups and include them in their strategies, especially when targeting younger generations.

Lastly, Pransopon and Hoonsopon (2019) confirm the influence of reference groups, such as celebrities and athletes, on sporting product purchases. The study advises that tailoring reference group strategies to fit the distinct types of consumers is key to increase the sales rate.

All in all, the reviewed studies provide evidence for both side of the hypothesis. Whereas several findings affirm that culture is a powerful determinant of consumer behaviour, others demonstrate that reference groups exert significant influence, sometimes within and beyond cultural frameworks. As the hypothesis is not fully confirmed or rejected, we proceed to question experts in the topic that will be able to provide a clearer and more conclusive assessment.

1.2 Interview

To have a professional point of view of the topic and properly evaluate the hypothesis, Dr. Jacqueline Eastman and Dr. Seth Ketron kindly agreed to be interviewed, immensely enriching the thesis. The entire interview transcribed can be found in the *Appendix*.

Dr. Jacqueline Eastman is a leading expert in the field of consumer behaviour, making her contribution to this project particularly significant. As Co-Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour*, she is a very referential figure in the industry. This role means that she is at the forefront of current research trends and developments. Moreover, she is the Vice President of Research for the American Marketing Association Higher Ed. SIG, further reflecting her commitment and profound knowledge on the area. With her extensive background as Professor of Marketing at the Florida Gulf Coast University, Dr. Eastman brings a deep understanding of consumer psychology and behavioural patterns (Jacqueline Eastman | LinkedIn, n.d.).

On the other hand, Dr. Seth Ketron is currently an Associate Professor of Marketing at the university of St. Thomas. He has had abundant amounts of expertise both in academic settings, such as the University of North Texas or East Carolina University, and in practical research. His position as Associate Editor of the *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* places him at the centre of the field, allowing him to critically engage with the topic of this paper (Seth Ketron | LinkedIn, n.d.).

To begin the study, I focused on external influences as a whole. The first question was: “*In your view, how do external factors, such as culture and reference groups, shape consumer behaviour?*”. Both experts emphasized the importance of external factors. Dr. Seth Ketron noted that consumer often look to others when making decisions, especially when trying to reinforce their group identity or aim to belong to a certain group. He also stated that culture influences fundamental aspects of life, saying that it “shapes how we perceive ourselves, other people, objects, how we eat, dress, live...” (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). Dr. Jacqueline Eastman furthered this view by explaining that family plays a crucial role in forging buying habits during early childhood. In her words, “the family plays an instrumental role in the socialization of children as consumers”, particularly in determining brand preferences and initially grasping product categories such as luxury. Moreover, she pointed out that cultural symbolism affects consumer perception (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

Next, I inquired to what extent culture determines consumer preferences and brand choices. This question aimed to examine whether cultural background strongly determines the types of products and brand consumers are drawn to. The first interviewee argued that culture is closely related to general consumption patterns, he claimed that “consumers might express liking or disliking of brands according to whether they want to be associated with a given culture or not”. Nonetheless, he acknowledged that in certain sectors, such as the fashion industry, culture can have a greater impact (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). Dr. Eastman contributed with her expertise on luxury products. She observed that, although we might expect culture to significantly influence luxury goods, her researches position against it. She expanded that “luxury product preferences tend not to vary as much as one would think across different cultures and countries”. However, cultural elements like colours, numbers, or symbols still play a considerable role in product perceptions (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

I then centred on reference groups, asking: “*How significant is the influence of reference groups in shaping purchase decisions?*”. Dr. Seth Ketron pointed out that the repercussion of such groups varies in accordance with the context: a product consumed in public increases the relevance of others’ opinions. At the same time, teenagers are more prone to be affected by them. He did mention that cultural context plays an important role, stating that “individualistic cultures tend to place greater emphasis on the individual’s preferences or values compared to collectivistic cultures” (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). The second expert agreed, describing reference groups as a significant factor, given that it is what consumers turn to when in need of information and guidance. She also stressed how digital platforms have heightened and strengthened the influence of reference groups, adding that “opinion leadership has moved online with the role of social media, influencers, and the use of strangers’ reviews” (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

To further the comparison and gain an unambiguous and straightforward take on the hypothesis, I asked both interviewees which of the two factors they believed had a stronger grasp on consumer behaviour. They both leaned slightly in favour of reference groups. Dr. Ketron reasoned that to the buyer, reference groups feel more “psychologically close” as they are easier to locate within their own life, whereas culture is much more broad and vague (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). However, they did add that the two of them cannot be completely disentangled from each other, as reference group, by definition, is partially shaped by cultural background. Dr. Jacqueline Eastman expressed a similar view, arguing that, although both have a fair share of importance, reference groups have “the edge”. The reason is that they are crucial as a source of knowledge for both products and brands (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

In order to dive deep into the intricacies of how these two variables interact with their direct environment, I also : “*Are there product categories where reference groups consistently take precedence over cultural background, or the other way around?*”. Even though the first interviewee affirmed that he does not believe that happens often, the second speaker did identify a differentiating pattern (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). Dr. Eastman exemplified by saying that in the luxury sector reference groups are notably more relevant than culture, given that “consumers want those ‘in the know’ to understand what they are buying when they buy high-end luxury products” (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

Finally, to conclude the interview and have an idea of how these factors might change in the future, I asked both participants if they had observed a shift in the relative importance of reference groups and culture over the recent decades. Both were aware of compelling shifts. Dr. Seth Ketron believed that “social media as a cultural mechanism has sped up the flow of information and ideas”, which allows individuals as a whole, and consumers particularly, to witness more cultures, and consequently to obtain more reference groups (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025). Dr. Jacqueline Eastman made a striking point, postulating that, in

her own words, “a teenagers in the U.S. may have more in common with other teenagers in other countries that they do with American adults”. She paints this picture of social media having lowered cultural barriers while giving more space to peer-based reference networks (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

What Dr. Eastman and Dr. Ketron have declared throughout this interview has brought a new, more nuanced and professional perspective to the conversation, enriching the overall analysis with their informed views. Furthermore, the fact that they are both based in the United States has added a valuable cross-cultural dimension to the project. Based on the insights gathered from both of these field experts, it becomes apparent that reference groups play a more determinant and valuable role in shaping consumer behaviour, compared to culture. While both factors are undeniably influential, and even at times woven together, the interviewees have steadily insisted on the accessibility and practical use of reference groups. Therefore, if we only rely on the results of the interview, the hypothesis stating that culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups should be rejected. Nevertheless, to achieve a thorough conclusion, we will take into consideration the opinions and views of regular citizens that do not possess any sort of special knowledge regarding the topic – hence, the survey depicted on the following section.

1.3 Survey

To get a final assessment, a survey was designed and distributed. The main aim was to test the two key hypotheses: H_2 = “In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups”, and H_3 = “In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles”, although this section will focus on H_2 . The entire survey is detailed in the *Appendix*.

The questionnaire was structured in three broad sections. First, respondents answered general demographic questions in order to contextualize the information gathered and better interpret the results. In the following two segments participants were presented with a series of statements related to culture and reference groups on one end, and social class and lifestyle on the other. Each of these affirmations was evaluated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly agree*). This configuration allowed a computation of average scores for each category that belonged to the same hypothesis, to afterwards compare the relative strength of their influence. Now, the results for each variable relevant to the first hypothesis will be interpreted and analysed in detail.

Regarding the introductory and demographic questions, the survey got a total of 102 answers. The majority of those belonged to the 18-24 age group (34,3%), followed by those with ages from 45-55 (26,5%) and over 55 (24,5%). The groups between 25-34 and 35-44 make up for a much smaller portion of the sample. The contrast between younger and older respondents

implies a wider variety of opinions and points of view, which will boost the trustworthiness of the results.

When it comes to nationality, the most represented group is the Spanish one (83,33%); however, a vast array of other countries appeared as well. The international nationalities present in the survey were: Mexican, English, Italian, Chinese, German, Japanese, Irish, Greek, French, Moroccan, Chilean, Dutch, Danish, Venezuelan, Austrian, Canadian, Portuguese, Malaysian, and Argentinian. This cultural diversity allows for a comparison of behaviours and attitudes across different cultural backgrounds.

The last question in this brief preface asked: *“How often do you purchase products for yourself?”*. Almost half of them (40,2%) stated “often”, 34,3% declared “sometimes”, 18,6% selected “very often”, and only a small percentage answered “rarely” or “never”. Thus, the majority of respondents engage in regular consumption, which makes them suitable for studying their buying patterns and motivations, and to which extent these rely on the external factors aforementioned.

Starting with the questions with respect to culture, we see a trend towards neutrality and slight agreement. In the statement *“I often buy products that reflect the values and traditions of my culture”*, the majority of respondents (35,3%) selected “Neither agree or disagree”, whereas 34,3% chose agreement (scores 4 and 5) and 30,4% chose disagreement (scores 2 and 1). This practically even distribution indicates a lack of strong influence from cultural values, at least consciously, when purchasing items. The one aspect in which culture did have a more overpowering positive response, was on: *“It’s somewhat important to me whether brands respect cultural symbols in their marketing”*. A little bit less than half of the answers (40,2%) agreed, whereas 27,5% disagreed and 34,4% remained neutral. Likewise, when asked whether they prefer brands that align with their local culture, 44,2% leaned toward agreement, however a considerable percentage (28,4%) expressed disagreement and 27,5% remained neutral. This does suggest a moderate effect of culture, but not overwhelming so.

On the other hand, the survey found that celebrity endorsements sharing a cultural background is not a significant variable. In fact, the answers were predominantly negative (44,1%) or neutral (28,4%), meanwhile, only 27,4% seemed to be in favour. Lastly, the influence of culture on product packaging was met with a lot of inharmonious opinions: 30,4% of participants chose neutral, 37,3% agreed, and 32,3% disagreed.

The average of the “culture” category gives a result of 3,02 which leads us to believe that, although it has a significant and it definitely plays a role within consumer decisions, it is not an element that consumers have extremely present in their mundane lives. The average found will be later on compared to the index corresponding to reference groups.

In contrast, with reference groups we see a consistent stronger agreement throughout pretty much all questions. For example, the declaration “*I often consider my friends’ opinions before making a purchase*”, had an overwhelming positive response, with 63,7% of participants agreeing, and only 26,3% disagreeing or maintaining a neutral answer. Moreover, it is in this category where the highest rates of agreement of Hypothesis 2 can be found. The statements “*I avoid products that are associated with groups I don’t want to be identified with*” and “*I follow product recommendations from people I trust, even if they are not experts*” had an overall approval of 68,7% and 64,7%, respectively.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that a couple statements had a less enthusiastically positive response, and instead angled towards more moderate reactions. This is especially the case of the question that analysed whether participants purchase items to feel like they belong to a group of people they admire. Only 36,3% agreed, 18,6% chose the unbiased option, whereas 45,1% somewhat disagreed with it. Furthermore, the idea of buying products out of fear of being judged by others received 45% of positive answers, 28,4% of neutral, and 26,2% of negative.

The average of the “reference groups” portion of the survey is 3,53. This result shows that although reference groups do not have a foolproof performance, the trend that surrounds them is quite positive. Ergo, consumers will be, to a certain extent, vulnerable to their effects and influence.

This information provided by actual consumers and citizens that interact daily – or at least regularly – with different brands and products offers an absolutely key insight to make a final decision regarding the hypothesis in an informed and truthful manner. Comparing the average of culture (3,02) and reference groups (3,53), we observe that the latter are half point above the former. The data showcases that reference groups have a more definite and clear influence over consumer behaviour than culture. It goes without saying that culture is not irrelevant by any means, however they are more likely to evoke neutral or mixed responses. On the other hand, as we have seen, reference groups follow a more persistent and steady pattern, implying that their influence is more decisive in shaping buyer decisions. Consequently, relying on the information of the survey, we would reject Hypothesis 2. The following table succinctly summarizes all relevant information exposed in this section:

Table 2. Summary survey’s findings regarding H₂.

Hypothesis (H ₂)	In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups.
Culture	Mixed to moderate influence. Some agreement on brand alignment with culture and cultural symbols.

	Weak influence regarding celebrities' background and packaging. Average score: 3,02
Reference groups	Stronger more consistent agreement. High influence from trusted sources, friends' opinions, and avoiding negative associations. Moderate agreement on purchasing to feel included or not judged. Average score: 3,53
Conclusion	H ₂ is rejected based on survey data.

Note. Author's own elaboration

1.4 Discussion

With all the information gathered throughout this project, considering the base, the literature review, the interviews, and the survey, we intend now to reach a final conclusion in respect with H₂ = “In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups”.

The theoretical framework profoundly explained each of the factors. The main ideas are that culture shapes consumer behaviour through shared values and symbolic meanings, influencing how products are perceived, and therefore marketed across societies (McCracken, 1986; Albrecht, 2023). On the other hand, reference groups affect behaviour through informational, normative, or value-expressive influence (Peter & Olson, 2009). Reference groups can significantly shape how individuals evaluate and consume products (Park & Lessig, 1977).

The scoping review echoes the idea from the base that culture provides the broad foundation of consumer behaviour, affecting purchasing decisions, which becomes evident when comparing regions, such as East Asia and Eastern Europe or Singapore and Hong Kong (Samli, 2012; Yuan, 2011; Sharma et. al. 2006). Moreover, the cultural meaning model stresses how meanings embedded in products reflect shared cultural values (McCracken, 1986). This is consistent with findings from the literature review, for example, Gentina et. al. (2013) demonstrate that consumer preferences and motivations differ across cultures comparing American and French teenagers. At the same time, both sources show that reference groups can exert a strong influence, particularly in contexts where social identity or peer approval is important, highlighting the presence and recurrence of aspirational reference groups (Escalas & Bettman, 2003; Turčínková & Moisidis, 2014). Moreover, as the theoretical framework states, reference groups' impact varies across cultures (Samli, 2012). For instance, in the scoping review, Yang et al. (2007) find stronger normative influence in collectivist cultures like China compared to more individualistic cultures like the U.S. Similarly, Zirena-Bejarano & Zirena (2024) stress that younger generations' reliance on peer recommendations reflects both modern reference group dynamics and shifting cultural

values. All in all, the conclusion of the literature review is non-conclusive in regards to Hypothesis 2.

The interview with field experts adds into the discussion, emphasizing the complexity of not only both factors on their own, but also the interaction between them. Both Dr. Eastman and Dr. Ketron mentioned that culture fundamentally shapes perception and behaviours, aligning with the cultural meaning model disclosed in the base (McCracken, 1986). This model is also illustrated in Dr. Eastman's argument that symbols, such as colours or numbers, impact product perception; as we had previously seen, symbols have different significances and meanings across cultures (Wagner, 2021). On reference groups, Dr. Ketron highlighted how their influence can increase in certain contexts, like public consumption, which supports Hawkins and Mothersbaugh (2010) concept of normative influence, where social pressure is stronger with goods consumed in public. Moreover, Dr. Eastman's point that social media has intensified the role of reference groups aligns with Peter and Olson's (2009) explanation on informational influence and how consumers rely on others for guidance and advice. Importantly, both experts acknowledged that reference groups and culture are somehow intertwined. Dr Eastman's comment that teenagers globally may now have more in common with peers in other countries than with adults in their own culture mirrors Levitt's (1983) claim that globalisation and mass communication are driving the homogenization of consumer tastes all around the world, a key argument when supporting standardization strategies. Nevertheless, both interviewees did agree that, in today's context, reference groups tend to exert a stronger influence on consumer behaviour than culture itself (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025; (J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025).

Lastly, the survey showcases that culture influences consumer behaviour in subtle manners, sometimes even subconsciously. Questions about cultural alignment of products and packaging generated mixed responses, with many participants remaining neutral or, at most, showing slight agreement (the overall score was of 3,02). These findings are consistent with Samli (2012) and McCracken (1986), who argue that culture provides a shared system of meanings through which consumers interpret and perceive products, rather than acting as a direct behavioural driver. In contrast, reference groups represented a stronger and more tangible force in the survey, with an average score of 3,53. Statements related to friends opinions, avoiding undesirable groups, and following recommendations from trusted ones received repeatedly high rates of agreement. The results tightly parallel the insights from both Dr. Ketron and Dr. Eastman, who illustrated that reference groups feel more psychologically close and provide concrete information for purchase decisions (S. Ketron, personal communication, May 28, 2025; J. Eastman, personal communication, May 26, 2025). As a consequence, the survey declared reference groups to be more relevant within the studied hypothesis.

All in all, the second hypothesis: *"In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups"*, is rejected for the following

reasons. As the scoping review did not provide a conclusive answer to the premise, additional research methods were necessary. Both the expert interviews and the survey pointed consistently towards reference groups as the factor more impactful regarding consumer decisions. When we combine this evidence with the theoretical knowledge of the base, we find sufficient confirmation as to reject Hypothesis 2. It is important to note, though, that, as aforementioned, culture shapes consumer decisions in a more subtle and foundational way that, despite being somewhat unperceivable for the buyer, still plays a crucial role within the realm of consumer behaviour.

2. International comparison between social class and lifestyles

2.1 Literature review

In order to conduct the scoping review, a systematic research was implemented through the academic sites Web of Science and Scopus. The query used was “consumer behaviour”, “social class”, and “lifestyle” as title, and “marketing” as topic. A total of 162 articles were initially found. After excluding 15 articles as they were duplicated, 130 were additionally discarded because of the title or abstract. That left 17 articles that were thoroughly analysed to test their relevance to the topic and the hypothesis. Ultimately, 9 were selected and are the ones illustrated in the following literature review. A table with the inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as a diagram visually explaining the whole process can be found in the *Appendix*.

Aljukhadar et al. (2021) provide compelling evidence that an individual’s social class shapes almost all facets of consumer behaviour. Social class significantly determines where individuals live, where and how they travel, what clothes they wear, and what media they consume. This research states that upper-class consumers display a broader and more international approach towards consumption, whereas lower-class consumers remain more locally or nationally anchored. These class-based behaviours can be found as well in the retail landscape. Premium and low-cost retailers significantly grew in the past years at the expense of mid-priced one, which diminished. This urges marketers to consider social class as a key variable, particularly, to adopt consumer relationship management strategies that explicitly segment based on social class. Moreover, it goes to exhibit that many consumer segments are still excluded from full participation due its resources, reinforcing the idea that class-based constraints continue to shape consumer behaviour.

This view is further enriched by Chen et. al. (2022), who demonstrate that consumptions is widely drive by class structure. They exemplify this, by describing that young people may imitate consumption patterns of a higher class to overcompensate for their lack of wealth, a behaviour aligned with conspicuous consumption. While this behaviour might initially resemble a lifestyle variable, it is ultimately rooted in social class dynamics.

Feng et. al. (2024) add a nuanced layer to social class by examining how it influences green consumption behaviour. They stress that social class has significant psychological and cultural

implications. While lower-class consumers are often assumed to be less engaged in green behaviours due to practical economic constraints, this research challenges that view, by showing that green products carrying identity symbolism can stimulate purchase intentions among these consumers. This demonstrates that even when consumption appears to align with lifestyle values such as environmentalism, the underlying motive may still be social class, particularly when symbolic value and identity are at play. Consequently, strategies to promote sustainable consumption must consider social class, suggesting that it remains a significant element shaping consumer behaviour.

Nevertheless, to analyse whether social class prevails over lifestyle, the role of the latter must be studied. According to Géci et. al. (2020), lifestyle encompasses someone's way of living or the things that individuals or groups usually do. It is a modern determinant of decision-making.

This is supported by Adnan et. al. (2022) They show that lifestyle is absolutely crucial when shaping shopping behaviour and ecological choices. Companies and marketers can leverage this to build strategies that resonate with the values and habits that come with different lifestyles.

Liu et. al. (2018) add that Generation Y uses lifestyle brands to signify group identity and belonging. Lifestyle is not just a reflection of class, but a way to express oneself. This generation tends to seek social alignment through brand choices, especially in hospitality, where lifestyle hotels have gained traction. As a consequence, several hotel firms in the recent years have included lifestyle hotel brands in their hotel portfolio, such as Marriott or Hilton.

Following the generation theme, Wijaya et. al. (2020) note the strategic importance of lifestyle in defining customer segments among Generation Z. This age group has a rather digitally-oriented lifestyle, also called "e-lifestyle", which appears to be essential when creating effective marketing strategies and product positioning. Generation Z heavily depends on mobile phones, digital communications, and online platforms for everything, even consumption. While these patterns suggest that lifestyle plays a protagonist role, it is important to specify that access to such devices and resources is not universal. Therefore, although lifestyle serves as a valuable segmentation tool, it is social class the one to include or exclude citizens from these behaviours.

Liang et. al. (2024) further depicts lifestyle's predictive role since it mediates the relationship between sustainable consumption perceptions and actual consumption. Generational differences in lifestyle influence how consumption values translate into action, indicating that lifestyle, rather than social class alone, can determine behavioural outcomes.

Lastly, Utama et. al. (2021) finish off by establishing that lifestyle affects general and specific-category consumption, in the case of their research, coffee. They have determined that lifestyle variables have the strongest impact, surpassing health reasons or sensory appeal. This illustrates that lifestyle is an element whose importance predominates over others.

Although the sum of all the findings these studies offer do point towards social class being more important than lifestyles, there is no unanimous agreement. To accurately determine if the hypothesis can be, in fact, accepted, a highly-knowledgeable expert in the field provided valuable information and opinions about it.

2.2 Interview

To contrast the information acquired with the literature review, Dr. Jacqueline Eastman graciously acceded to give her experienced and skilled perspective on the topic. The entire interview transcribed can be found in the *Appendix*. As I have previously mentioned, Dr. Eastman has unvaluable expertise in the topic, which is incredibly useful to see the hypothesis through professional, cross-cultural lenses.

Firstly, to have a proper understanding of both factors, and because of the fact that in the base it had been mentioned that they have some sort of correlation, I asked about the possibility of social class and lifestyle being interrelated. Dr. Eastman acknowledged a fair relationship between the two, given that income and education (which are crucial barometers for social class) can determine an individual's lifestyle. This includes, as she indicated, influencing “the choice of activities, interests, and opinions consumers hold” (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

Once this concept was established, I sought to understand “*to what extent does culture determine consumer preferences and brand choices*”. According to the interviewee, the impact of social class on preferences is quite complex. She illustrated this by comparing two individuals earning the same salary, one through working two jobs and the other one through investments. Although they earn the same money, they belong to different social classes. Therefore, their consumption patterns will differ in several areas, e.g., where they live, potential luxury consumption... paralleling the idea that “birds of a feather flock together” (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

Following the social class theme, I asked whether social class is still a major determinant in consumer segmentation, or consumer behaviour in general. Dr. Jacqueline Eastman revealed that, even though it is a sensitive topic most people shy away from, it does play an important role. She argued that some differences people attribute to demographic factors are often more accurately depicted and explained through social class. Therefore, it is sometimes underestimated by marketers, or even consumer themselves, without noticing its true relevance (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

To better understand the other side of the coin, regarding the hypothesis, I also explored lifestyle asking: “*Do you believe that lifestyle is an important element when it comes to consumer behaviour*”. Dr. Eastman emphasized that lifestyle matters, in particular in certain product

categories such as “food choices, leisure, discretionary spending, and luxury”. It can be a remarkably important element (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

In addition, to have a more concise grasp and comprehension of the trajectory the lifestyle factor has undertaken, I inquired: “*Would you say that the importance of lifestyle has diminished or increased over the past years?*”. This can be a useful knowledge when considering how it may shift and change in the future. The expert responded that she has actually “not seen a change in the importance of lifestyle in the past 30 years”. Nonetheless, she did note that what is understood by “lifestyle”, has evolved. That is to say that, despite the fact that the concept remains central, the implications and meanings given to it are subject to change (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

To directly, compare the two factors, I asked Dr. Jacqueline Eastman which of them – social class or lifestyle – offers more actionable insights for marketers. She took a balanced approach, postulating that both are important and that the answer “comes down to the product category or domain”. In consequence, to explore this further, I requested a deeper explanation of in which market segments or sectors the influence of one of the variables overpowers the other. Dr. Eastman claimed that social class is more predictive of consumer behaviour when it comes to luxury products, due to the weight of not just income, but the source of it as well. On the contrary, lifestyle becomes more predictive for leisure products, where preferences are more susceptible to the consumer’s interests and activities (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025).

This interview proved to be extremely valuable for my research, as it offered interesting and consequential insights regarding the topic, as well as the studied hypothesis. Dr. Jacqueline Eastman’s perspective supported several points identified in the theoretical framework and, most importantly, introduced new angles that I had not previously considered. Analysing the responses from Dr. Eastman, it is clear that both social class and lifestyle are influential in consumer behaviour, however, their impact varies along with the context. Given this nuanced and context-heavy realization, we cannot draw any type of definite and permanent conclusions. Thus, the hypothesis that “*in the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles*” cannot be accepted nor rejected. With the idea to reach an actual outcome with regards to Hypothesis 3, we entrusted and took into account real-life consumers and their habits.

2.3 Survey

To perform a last assessment on the verity of H_3 = “In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles”, the survey also considered these variables. The format and configuration is the same as with the previous hypothesis, each question is evaluated on a scale from 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 5 (*Strongly*

agree), which will allow afterwards for an average computation and comparison. The entire survey is detailed in the *Appendix*.

Social class was the first component analysed. The statement “*I feel that my occupation and education level influence the types of products I buy*” received a pretty fair distribution, with 30,4% neutral, 33,3% not being in accordance (scores 1 and 2), and 36,3% agreeing (scores 4 and 5). This balance suggests that there is weak, or at most, moderate influence. When inquired about if participants prefer to shop where other customers are from a similar social background, responses were, again, mixed. 39,2% of respondents saw eye to eye, while 33,4% disagreed and 27,5% expressed neutrality. Therefore, some feel more comfortable in class-aligned spaces, but it is not a powerful motivator either.

The question that focused on whether citizens relate more to advertisements that represent or reflect their profession or income, saw a slight unfavourable outcome. Out of all the respondents, 41,2% disagreed with this idea, 34,3% had no resolute opinions about it, and solely 24,5% fully agreed. Moreover, the affirmation “*I would avoid purchasing something if I thought it was meant for a social group I don't identify with*” had a strong wave of disagreement (46,1%) with a disinterest of 28,4%, and only 25,4% agreeing. Overall, this weakens the concept of consumers heavily identifying with class-based marketing, as they do not care for it, or even, purposely look away from it. However, the belief that certain stores “belong” to specific social class did elicit a positive response: 59,9% agreed while 40,1% disagreed or remained neutral. This goes to show that consumers are indeed aware of social class distinctions.

The average of “social class” makes up for 3,03 points, a moderate score. All in all, the influence of social class can be deemed inconsistent and quite unexceptional. Despite the fact that people are aware of class differences, particularly in retail spaces, these facts do not necessarily translate into buying decisions or heavy marketing implications.

Conversely, lifestyle-oriented questions show a compelling and substantial positive trend. All the statements from this section obtained an overwhelming amount of affirmative responses. The question “*I choose products that match how I spend my free time or hobbies*” had a 72,5% approval rate, with only 27,4% disagreements or neutrality. This is the first indicator that lifestyle is a major factor influencing consumption behaviour. Similarly, 62,7% of participants confirmed that they believe their purchases decisions are a good reflection of who they are; disagreement or indifference here made up for 37,2% in total. The statement regarding whether changes in one's routine affects their purchases was ratified by 51,9% of respondents, denied by 18,6%, and deemed unimportant for 29,4%. The idea that consumers value products that facilitate the way of life they desire was widely accepted, with 79,5% participants agreeing and only 20,7% giving negative or neutral feedback. At last, “*I look for convenience and practicality in products because of my routine*” confirmed the already-evident pattern, with the highest positive response of the whole survey: 80,4% agreements, 14,7% neither agreements nor disagreements, and 4,9% disagreements.

With all of this data, the average computed is of virtually 4 (3,94). The patterns that we have witnessed highlight the fact that lifestyle is a dominant factor within consumer behaviour, with practically all respondents aligning their purchases and routines with their way of living.

Given the ambiguity that surrounds this hypothesis, being able to take into consideration data from real-life consumers, which are very leaning towards one of the factors, is unquestionably a really important asset to the project. Comparing social class (3,03) and lifestyle (3,94), the difference among both is blatant and indisputable. Although social class has a certain degree of relevance, especially when it comes to social perceptions, it does not seem to carry that much value into marketing ramifications. On the contrary, lifestyle is not only widely acknowledged by consumers, but also greatly influences product selection and buying choices. All things considered, it is safe to say that, only taking into account the results of this survey, Hypothesis 3 should be rejected. *Table 4* illustrates the key ideas of the survey and its findings.

Table 4. Summary survey's findings regarding H₃.

Hypothesis (H ₃)	In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles.
Social class	Mixed to moderate influence. Some awareness of class distinctions but with limited purchase impact. Low agreement with class-based advertising or rejection of products aimed at different classes. Average score: 3,03
Lifestyles	Stronger more consistent agreement. High agreement with aligning purchases to hobbies, routines, desired lifestyles, and convenience. Average score: 3,94
Conclusion	H ₃ is rejected based on survey data.

Note. Author's own elaboration

2.4 Discussion

With all the information gathered throughout this project, considering the base, the literature review, the interviews, and the survey, we intend now to reach a final conclusion in respect with the third hypothesis: *“In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles”*.

The main concepts exposed in the theoretical framework are the subsequent. Social class is defined by status and prestige. It is also partially described through education and occupation. (Peter & Olson, 2009). Different classes prefer distinct products and media, leading marketers to tailor offerings accordingly (Hoyer et al., 2020; Prior & Nagel, 2011). On the other hand, lifestyle is

defined as a person's typical way of living, which can vary and evolve over time (Lifestyle, 2025; Solomon, 2006). Marketers use lifestyle research to identify niche segments and emerging trends, helping them adapt products and services to changing consumer behaviours (Hoyer et al., 2020).

The scoping review reveals that both social class and lifestyle play an important role in shaping consumer behaviour, although their influences may sometimes overlap. Social class continuously impacts consumption by establishing and defining the access to resources and the symbolic meanings attached to certain goods, as specified by Aljukhadar et. al. (2021) and Chen et. al. (2022). This is supported by theoretical perspectives which state that social class not only influence what consumer can afford, but also their aspirations and which products are found desirable to them (Hoyer et. al. 2020). On the other hand, lifestyle significantly shapes buying choices. Studies such as those by Adnan et. al. (2022), Liu et. al. (2018), and Wijaya et. al. (2020) demonstrate that lifestyle affects brand preferences, ecological choices, and digital consumption, especially among younger consumers. Nevertheless, lifestyle behaviours may depend on the limits a certain social class imposes. Feng et. al. (2024) illustrate how buyer from lower classes might participate in green consumption when products carry strong identity symbolism, connecting lifestyle back to class-based resources. This is why the final conclusion of the literature review is that social class may be a slightly more determinant factor for consumer behaviour than lifestyle.

Dr. Jacqueline Eastman's point of view adds further depth to the discussion (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025). During the interview, she acknowledged and pointed out that social class influences consumption patterns beyond the spendable income. With her example of two individuals earning the same salary from different sources, she complemented the point in the framework made by Peter and Olson (2009) and Allen and Anderson (1994). They postulated that social class identification is determined by more than just income; education, occupation, family history, social behaviour... all play a role. Moreover, Dr. Eastman stressed that the dominance of social class or lifestyle depends on the type of product. She exemplified saying that lifestyle was deemed influential in categories like food, leisure, and discretionary spending, mirroring Holbrook (1993), who provided similar examples (nostalgia segments and leisure-driven goods). At the same time, she argued that social class is more predictive for luxury products, which is consistent with the framework examined of conspicuous consumption (Page, 1992).

The survey results provide clear insights regarding the importance of social class and lifestyle in consumer behaviour. The data on social class was lower than what could be expected. Most of the questions related to class showed weak or inconsistent influence on buying behaviour; for example, only 24,5% of participants agreed they relate more to advertisements targeting their profession or income. This illustrates Dr. Eastman's observation that social class is often underestimated or less apparent to consumers, despite its structural relevance (J. Eastman, personal communication, June 2, 2025). Conversely, lifestyle-related statements generated a highly positive

response. Consumers clearly see the connection between their purchases and their hobbies and desired ways of life, with approval rates as high as 80,4%. This aligns with the base's view that lifestyle guides purchasing decisions via their personal motivations and routines (Hawkins & Mothersbaugh, 2010). Importantly, the survey offers new empirical support against the scoping review. It suggests that while social class has an unquestionable importance, lifestyle provides more guidance in the actual moment of buying a product or choosing what to buy. This is the reasoning behind the average score of each category, as well as the conclusion that lifestyles are a more determinant factor than social class.

The conclusion regarding H_3 = "In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles", ultimately rests on the smallest details, given the overall ambiguity in the findings. The scoping review did testify in favour of the hypothesis, however, it was not a complete agreement by all authors. In addition, the interview results remain inconclusive. Given that a hypothesis cannot be accepted when contradictory evidence exists, and taking into consideration the significant difference observed in the survey results, we incline towards rejecting the hypothesis.

Conclusions

This final section summarizes the main findings of the project and reflects on the overall research process. It brings together the key points discussed throughout the paper and it polishes the answers to those questions and topics of interest.

The main aim of this thesis was to give an answer to the following hypothesis:

H₁ = Within the field of international marketing, cultural factors exert a stronger influence on consumer behaviour than social and personal factors.

As it has been explicitly shown, the way to do this was through two auxiliary hypotheses, which were:

H₂ = In the context of international marketing, culture has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than reference groups.

H₃ = In the context of international marketing, social class has a greater impact on consumer behaviour than lifestyles.

Both of these statements were found to be rejected, for the reasons specified on the corresponding “*Discussion*” passages. We have empirically proven that when comparing a proxy of cultural factors (culture) with a proxy of social factors (reference groups), the latter resulted to be more significant. This conclusion stems from various layers of analysis, although it is important to highlight the enormous importance of the primary data gathered. While the literature review and theoretical framework recognized the foundational role when it comes to symbolic meanings and shared values, the empirical methods (the interviews and the survey), repeatedly stressed the more direct and perceptible influence of reference groups over culture on purchasing decisions. Experts pointed out that in nowadays’ context, especially with the impact of social media and global connectivity, individuals tend to rely more heavily on friends recommendations and social validation than on abstract cultural norms. Similarly, the survey data ratified that reference groups elicited higher agreement among participants than cultural cues, indicating a more conscious influence.

Likewise, when comparing another proxy of culture (social class) with a proxy of personal factors (lifestyle), the second appeared to have more actionable insights. Even though the scoping review leaned slightly in favour towards social class – stressing how structural class-based elements influence desires and resources to access certain products – the survey results clearly deemed lifestyle as more influential in actual consumption decisions. Respondents time and time again tied their purchases with interests, habits, and self-expression, which illustrates the extent to which the personal factor guides consumer behaviour and is overall more telling of how individuals actually act and perceive consumption. Even in the interview, Dr. Eastman

confessed that social class, despite its indisputable relevance, tends to go unnoticed by consumers, while lifestyle operates at a more motivational and obvious level.

Thus, as cultural factors never seemed to land on top in either comparison, we cannot affirm that they have a greater impact than the other factors. As a consequence, the main hypothesis: *“Within the field of international marketing, cultural factors exert a stronger influence on consumer behaviour than social and personal factors”*, has no choice but to be rejected. As we have previously mentioned, though, this does not undermine the influence of cultural factors, just indicates that they act in more subconscious and subtle ways.

During the journey that supposed the elaboration and completion of this paper, I have been able to meet the objectives I had set for myself. By exploring how consumer behaviour shapes marketing strategies and how theoretical concepts are applied by brands in real-world situations, I have achieved my goal of expanding my academic and pragmatic knowledge. Furthermore, engaging with past literature and carrying out my own research has helped me think critically on current perspectives, allowing me to contribute – on a small scale – to the broader conversation. This has fulfilled my objective of participating to the already existing literature. Finally, I have managed to give a conclusive answer to all three of my hypotheses, reinforcing the overall purpose of this study.

Although consumer behaviour is a well-researched field, I have noticed that relatively few studies actually focus on comparing the influence of different external factors. Not only this, but moreover, the existing articles sometimes go as far as contradicting each other. This gap opens the door for future international research directly comparing the relative impact of cultural, social, and personal factors on consumer behaviour. This type of studies carry several marketing and managerial implications for companies. It could help marketers better understand which elements most strongly influence consumer decisions in different contexts, which could turn to more targeted strategies or more effective communication campaigns.

As a way to finish this project, I would like to highlight one last time the importance of consumer behaviour, and particularly the external factors that surround them, in the broad picture of the business world.

Appendix

CHAPTER I

Maslow's hierarchy of needs

The most basic need, and therefore the backbone of any human being, are **physiological needs**, given that they are basic for survival, such as nutrition and shelter. If someone is lacking more than one need, they are bound to tend these first, since the human body cannot properly function without them (Hopper, 2024).

Once physiological requirements are met, the immediate next need to tackle is **safety**. Safety is a constant need throughout one's life. According to Cherry (2024) examples of this need can be finding a job, possessing health insurance, or moving to a safer neighbourhood.

Together, physiological and safety needs make up for the so-called "basic needs" (Cherry, 2024).

Belongingness and love is considered the next need, where emotional relationships drive human behaviour. This encompasses both feeling loved and feeling love towards others. Belonging to social groups (e.g. sports team, book club...) also plays an important role (MasterClass, n.d.).

At the fourth level in Maslow's hierarchy is the need for **esteem**. Maslow classified esteem in two categories: (1) esteem for oneself (e.g. dignity, independence) and (2) the desire to gain the others' respect and recognition (e.g. status, prestige) (McLeod, 2025). Those who are able to satisfy these esteem needs are prone to feeling confident in themselves and their abilities (Cherry, 2024).

Together, belongingness and esteem constitute the "psychological needs" (Cherry, 2024).

At the very peak of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, are the **self-actualization** needs. "*What a man can be, he must be*" stated Maslow, he referred to the feeling that a person is living up to their full potential (Hopper, 2024). As reported by McLeod (2025), self-actualization may look different for each person, it could vary from becoming a parent to succeeding in a sport. Maslow did not actually believe everyone could experience true self-actualization, but he did regard that everyone experience transitory moments of it (e.g. childbirth or winning in a sport competition).

Classical conditioning

While looking into the digestion of dogs, Pavlov noticed that at first the dogs only salivated when they were directly in front of the food. Then, they started salivating before the food arrived, when they heard the sound of the food cart. Pavlov ran an experiment where he rang a bell just before presenting the dogs food. Initially, they showed no response to this, but with

time they started associating the bell sound with getting food. Eventually, they began salivating at the sound of the bell alone (Rehman et al., 2024).

According to Cherry (2023), the following concepts are defined as:

- Unconditioned stimulus: stimulus that triggers an automatic response.
- Neutral stimulus: stimulus that does not produce a response on its own.
- Conditioned stimulus: stimulus that used to be neutral, but now triggers a response.
- Unconditioned response: response that occurs without thought due to an unconditioned stimulus.
- Conditioned response: response that is learned.

Vinney (2024) described the classical conditioning process through three phases.

In the first phase, the unconditioned stimulus generates an unconditioned response. That is, presenting the food (unconditioned stimulus) naturally triggers dogs to salivate (unconditioned response). A neutral stimulus will now be introduced.

During the next phase, a neutral stimulus is combined with the unconditioned stimulus. Consequently, an association between the neutral stimulus and the unconditioned stimulus is created. The neutral stimulus has now shifted into a conditioned stimulus. In the earlier example, hearing a bell ring (neutral stimulus) is repeatedly paired with receiving food (unconditioned stimulus); as a result, the bell becomes a conditioned stimulus.

Once this association has been formed, the conditioned stimulus will evoke a reaction on the subject, even without the unconditioned stimulus. Said reaction is known as the conditioned response. For Pavlov's experiment, the sound of a bell (conditioned stimulus) makes dogs salivate (conditioned response).

Veblenian socio-psychological model

Veblen stated that for the so-called *leisure class*, a great amount of purchases do not stem from a practical nature, but by virtue of a "conspicuous consumption". Leisure class is defined as the members of the upper class that are exempt from productive work (Veblen, 1899). The Veblenian model has distinguished two forms of consumption:

- a) Conspicuous consumption. Goods or services that do not have any further utility or functionality except conferring a socio-economic position, such as luxury goods (Brindusa, 2019). This behaviour is does not intend to satisfy needs, but instead seeks for social recognition and differentiation (Zimmer, 2021).
- b) Inconspicuous consumption. Goods or services in which brands are not apparent, available or visible to most consumers, such as education or travelling (Eckhardt et al., 2013).

CHAPTER IV

Comparison between culture and reference groups

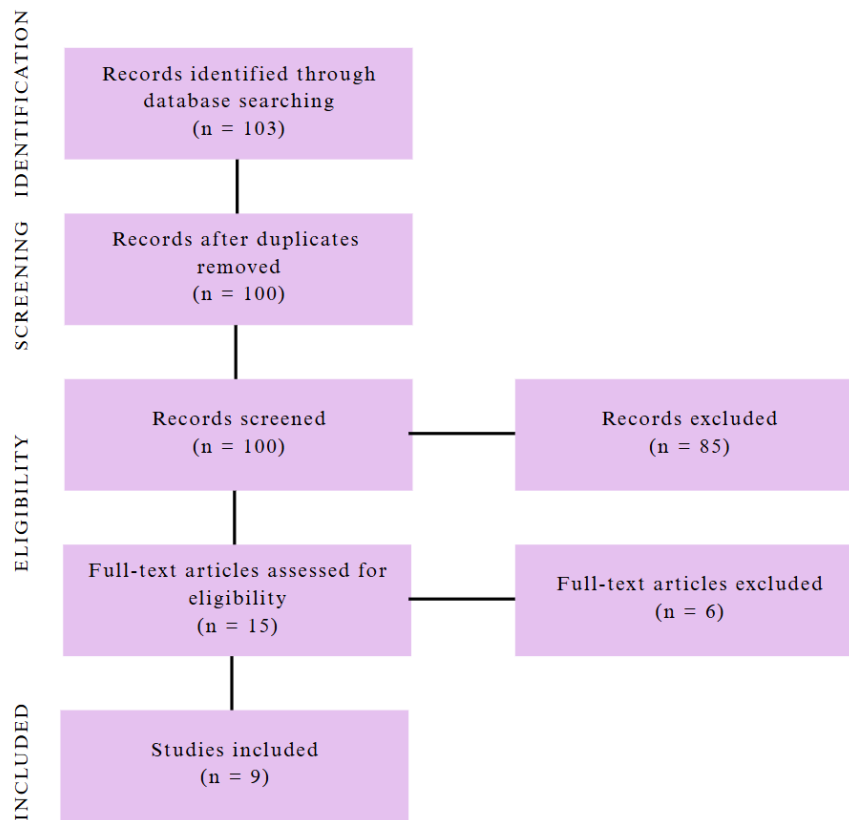
Literature review

Table 1. Summary of scoping review H₂.

Step	Criteria
Search	Databases: Scopus and Web of Science
	Search equations: Title “consumer behaviour” AND title “culture” AND “marketing” OR title “consumer behaviour” AND title “reference groups” AND “marketing”
	Period of publication: 1980 - 2025
	Language: English
Appraisal	Initial number of documents: 103 Final number after applying inclusion / exclusion: 9
	Inclusion criteria: articles, topic relevance, empirical research. Exclusion criteria: source other than articles, irrelevant focus, non-consumer contexts.

Note. Author’s own elaboration.

Diagram 1. Steps followed to elaborate the scoping review of H₂.



Note. Author's own elaboration.

Interview

Interview to Dr. Seth Ketron:

1. In your view, how do external factors, such as culture and reference groups, shape consumer behaviour?

Culture and reference groups have quite a bit of influence on consumer behavior. People look to others when making decisions, whether they are reinforcing their current group membership, trying to be like those others (aspirational groups), or trying to differentiate themselves from those others (avoidance groups). Culture also generally shapes how we perceive ourselves, other people, objects, how we eat/dress/live, etc. The effects can be far-reaching.

2. Based on your experience or research, to what extent does culture determine consumer preferences and brand choices?

See above re: general consumption patterns. Insofar as brands might represent different cultures, consumers might express liking/disliking of brands according to whether they want to

be associated with a given culture or not. Culture might also have a stronger influence in some product categories (e.g., fashion) than others.

3. How significant is the influence of reference groups (e.g., peers, family, opinion leaders) in shaping purchase decisions?

See above. Also, reference groups tend to differ in their importance depending on the purchase context (i.e., would this product be something that I would consume publicly, which would make others' opinions more important than something I would consume privately?) as well as age (i.e., younger consumers, especially teenagers, are prone to reference group influences more than older consumers). Culture can also affect the role of reference groups. For example, individualistic cultures tend to place greater emphasis on the individual's preferences/values vs. collectivistic cultures.

4. If you had to choose one, which do you believe has a stronger impact on consumer behaviour: culture or reference groups? Why?

I would say reference groups since the psychological distance between reference groups (which are typically easily identified and easy to think about) and the consumer would be lower than culture (which is broad and nebulous). However, I am not sure that these two concepts can be entirely disentangled as reference group definition, membership, and influence typically flow downstream from culture.

5. Are there product categories where reference groups consistently take precedence over cultural background, or the other way around?

See above – I don't think these two concepts are really separate in this regard.

6. Have you observed a shift in the relative importance of culture and reference groups over recent decades due to digitalisation or globalisation?

Yes, absolutely. Social media as a cultural mechanism has sped up the flow of information and ideas, and consumers can see more people and more information regarding reference groups on social media. Globalization has also affected culture, which in turn affects how we form preferences and consume – we have more access to more things from around the world, and we are able to know more about other cultures more quickly and easily than before.

Interview to Dr. Jacqueline Eastman:

1. In your view, how do external factors, such as culture and reference groups, shape consumer behaviour?

External factors, such as culture and reference groups, have a tremendous impact on consumer behaviour. The family plays an instrumental role in the socialization of children as

consumers. This influence impacts brand choices, for example, it has been found to be the means through how consumers learn about luxury. As children age, peers also play a role. Culture influences consumers' preferences, tastes, and habits, such as the role of symbolism (for example, different numbers symbolize different things based on culture).

2. Based on your experience or research, to what extent does culture determine consumer preferences and brand choices?

In my luxury research, one thing I have found is that luxury product preferences tend not to vary as much as one would think across different cultures and countries. Where there is influence would be in terms of the use of colors, numbers, symbols, etc . . .

3. How significant is the influence of reference groups (e.g., peers, family, opinion leaders) in shaping purchase decisions?

The influence of reference groups can be quite significant in shaping purchase decisions. Consumers look to peer, family, and opinion leaders for information and guidance. Opinion leadership has moved online with the role of social media, influencers, and the use of reviews (even from strangers) in guiding whether or not to buy.

4. If you had to choose one, which do you believe has a stronger impact on consumer behaviour: culture or reference groups? Why?

Both are important, but I think reference groups have the edge as they are such an important source of knowledge about products and brands for consumers.

5. Are there product categories where reference groups consistently take precedence over cultural background, or the other way around?

I think luxury would be one area where reference groups, such as the elites, would play a stronger role in impacting luxury consumption than culture. Consumers want those "in the know" to understand what they are buying when they buy high-end luxury products.

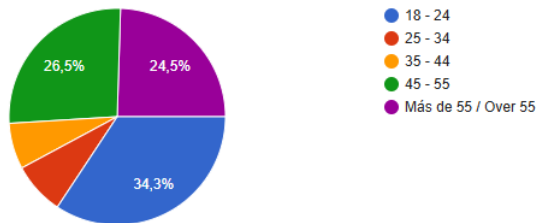
6. Have you observed a shift in the relative importance of culture and reference groups over recent decades due to digitalisation or globalisation?

With social media and digital marketing, cultural barriers have lowered. A teenager in the USA may have more in common with other teenagers in other countries, than they do with American adults, through the use of social media.

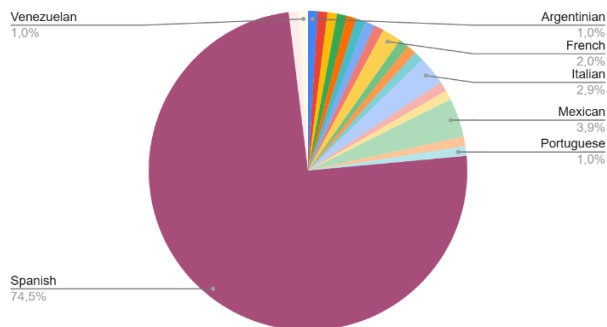
Survey

¿Cuántos años tienes? / How old are you?

102 respuestas

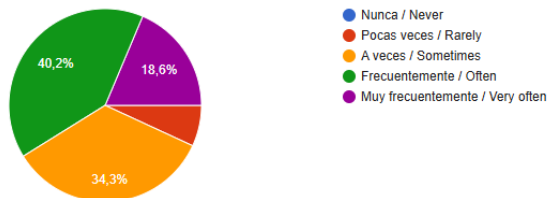


¿Cuál es tu nacionalidad? / Which is your nationality?



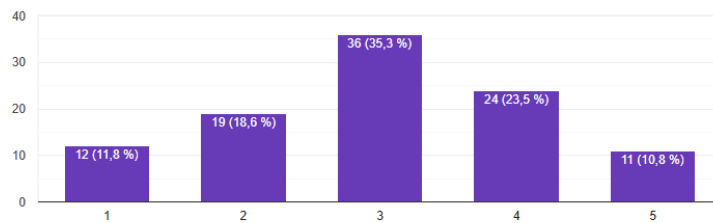
¿Con qué frecuencia compras productos para ti mismo/a? / How often do you purchase products for yourself?

102 respuestas



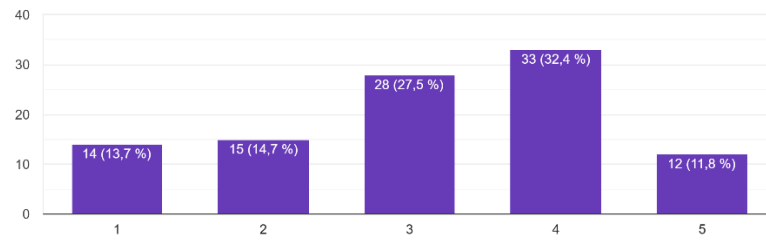
Suelo comprar productos que reflejan los valores y tradiciones de mi cultura.
/ I often buy products that reflect the values and traditions of my culture.

102 respuestas



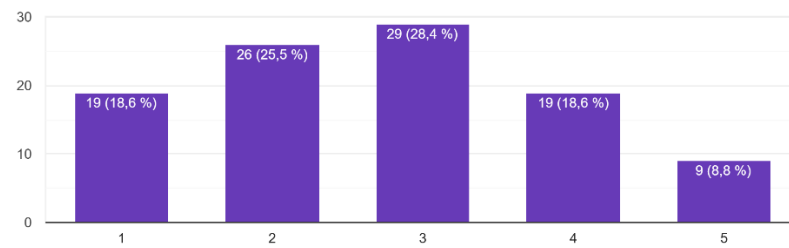
Prefiero marcas que adaptan sus productos o mensajes a mi cultura local. / I prefer brands that adapt their products or messaging to my local culture.

102 respuestas



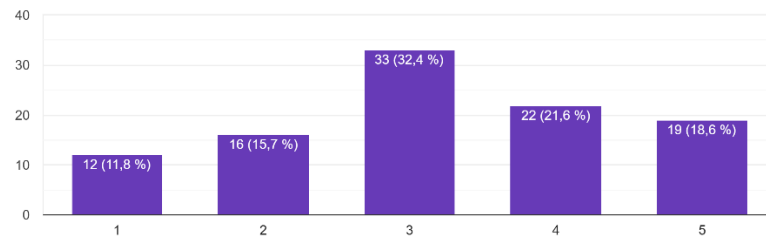
Las campañas con personajes famosos me parecen más atractivos cuando el/la famoso/a comparte mi trasfondo cultural o valores. / Celebrity... celebrity shares my cultural background or values.

102 respuestas



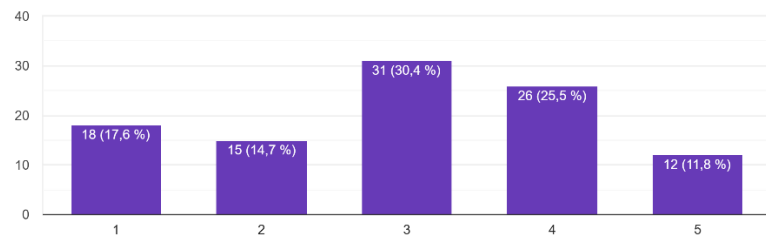
Para mí es algo importante que las marcas respeten los símbolos culturales en su publicidad. / It's somewhat important to me whether brands respect cultural symbols in their marketing.

102 respuestas



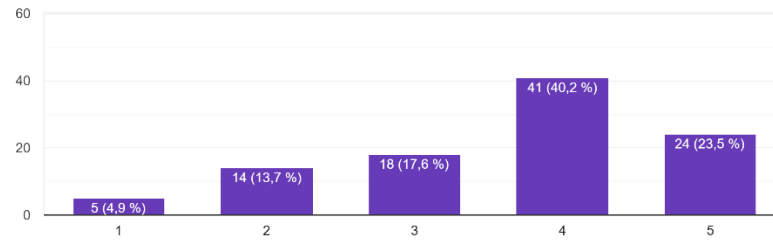
El diseño o el envase de un producto me influyen cuando reflejan elementos de mi cultura. / The design or packaging of a product influences me when it reflects elements of my culture.

102 respuestas



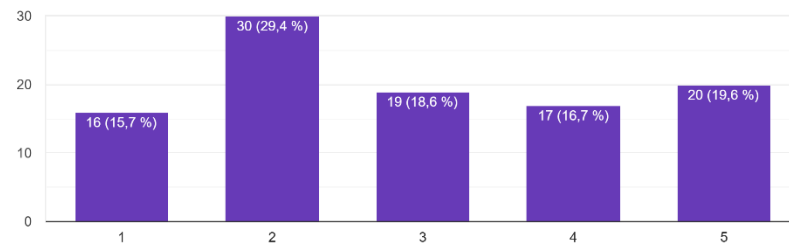
Suelo tener en cuenta las opiniones de mis amigos antes de hacer una compra. / I often consider my friends' opinions before making a purchase.

102 respuestas



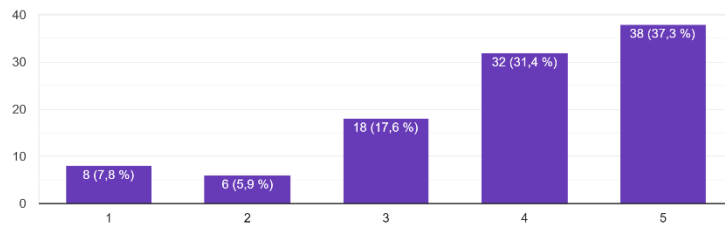
Compro productos que me ayudan a hacerme sentir parte de un grupo que admiro (por ejemplo, deportistas, músicos, influencers). / I buy products ...up I admire (e.g., athletes, musicians, influencers).

102 respuestas



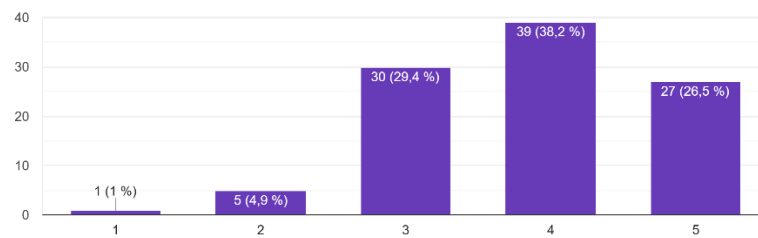
Evito productos asociados con grupos con los que no quiero identificarme. / I avoid products that are associated with groups I do not want to be identified with.

102 respuestas



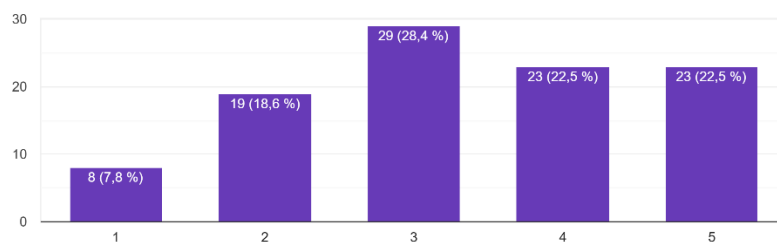
Sigo recomendaciones de productos de personas en las que confío, aunque no sean expertas. / I follow product recommendations from people I trust, even if they are not experts.

102 respuestas



Intento evitar ser juzgado/a negativamente por otros por los productos que utilizo. / I try to avoid being judged negatively by others because of the products I use.

102 respuestas



Comparison between social class and lifestyles

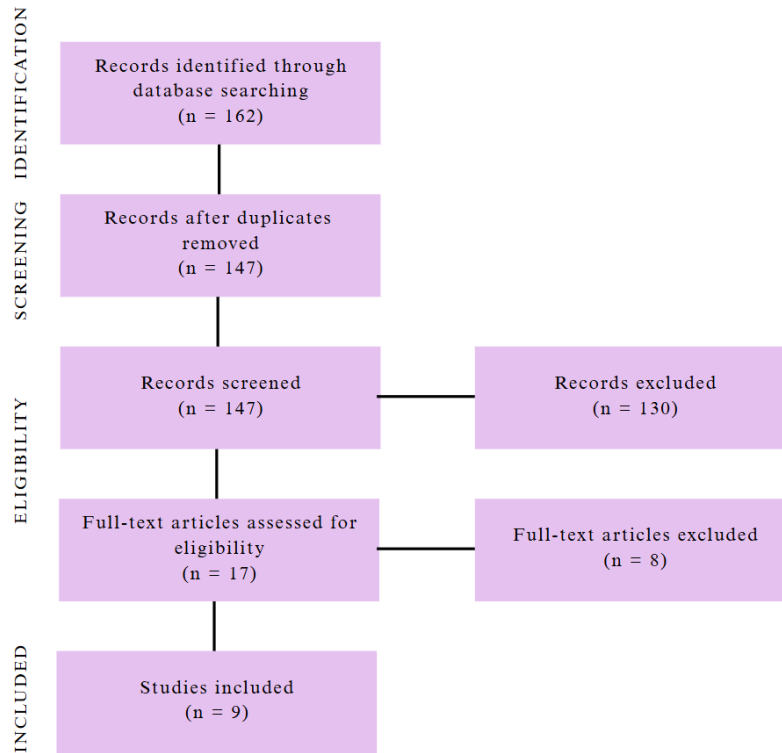
Literature review

Table 3. Summary of scoping review H₃.

Step	Criteria
Search	Databases: Scopus and Web of Science
	Search equations: Title “consumer behaviour” AND title “social class” AND “marketing” OR title “consumer behaviour” AND title “lifestyle” AND “marketing”
	Period of publication: 2018 - 2025
	Language: English
Appraisal	Initial number of documents: 162 Final number after applying inclusion / exclusion: 9
	Inclusion criteria: articles, topic relevance, empirical research. Exclusion criteria: source other than articles, irrelevant focus, non-consumer contexts.

Note. From author’s own elaboration.

Diagram 2. Steps followed to elaborate the scoping review of H₃.



Note. Author's own elaboration.

Interview

Interview to Dr. Eastman:

1. To what extent do you believe that social class and lifestyle are interrelated?

I think they are somewhat interrelated as income (and how getting that income) along with education can impact lifestyle and the choice of activities, interests, and opinions consumers hold.

2. In your experience, how strongly does social class influence consumer preferences and purchasing power?

I think social class does impact purchasing power significantly — someone working two jobs to make \$100,000 annually is very different than someone making the same amount from investments in their trust fund or investments. In terms of consumer preferences, it would impact where one lives (i.e., the idea that birds of a feather flock together) and could impact discretionary or luxury purchases.

3. Do you believe social class still plays a major role in modern consumer segmentation? Why or why not?

While people don't like to talk about social class, I think it still plays a role. I think differences people attribute to other demographic differences are more accurately represented as social class differences.

4. Do you believe that lifestyle is an important element when it comes to consumer behaviour?

It depends on the product category, for items such as food choices, leisure, discretionary spending, and luxury - it can be an important element.

5. Would you say that the importance given to lifestyle has diminished or increased over the past years?

I have not seen a change in the importance of lifestyle over the past 30 years. What has changed in what people incorporate under the tag of lifestyle.

6. In your opinion, which factor generally provides more actionable insights for marketers: social class or lifestyle?

I think both are important and it comes down to the product category or domain that the marketer is focused on.

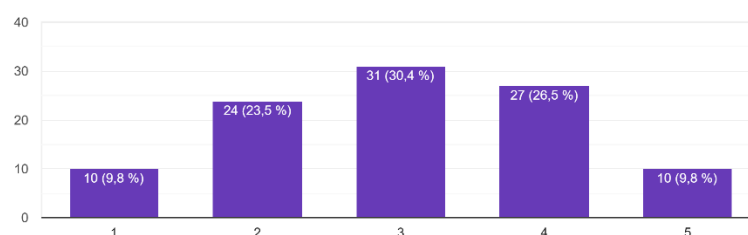
7. Are there specific market segments or sectors where social class is more predictive of behaviour than lifestyle, or vice versa?

I think social class is more predictive than lifestyle for luxury items given the importance not just of income but of where that income is coming from; I think lifestyle is more predictive for leisure items as lifestyle captures activities consumers like to do.

Survey

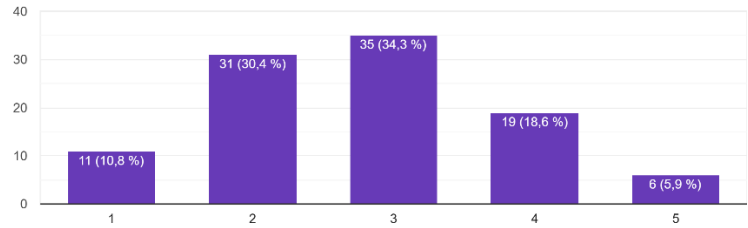
Siento que mi ocupación y nivel educativo influyen en los productos que compro. / I feel that my occupation and education level influence the types of products I buy.

102 respuestas



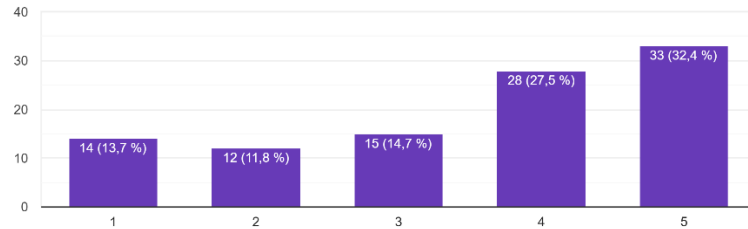
Me identifico más con anuncios que reflejan mi profesión o nivel de ingresos. / I relate more to advertisements that reflect my profession or income level.

102 respuestas



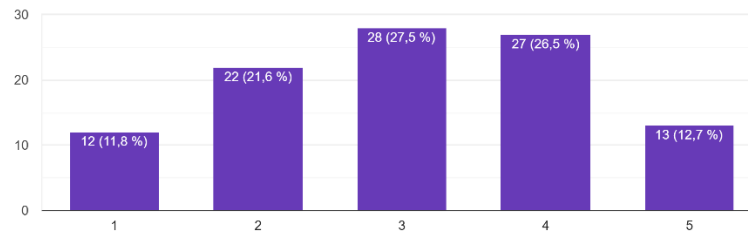
Creo que ciertas tiendas "pertenecen" a personas de clases sociales específicas. / I believe certain stores are "meant" for people in specific social classes.

102 respuestas



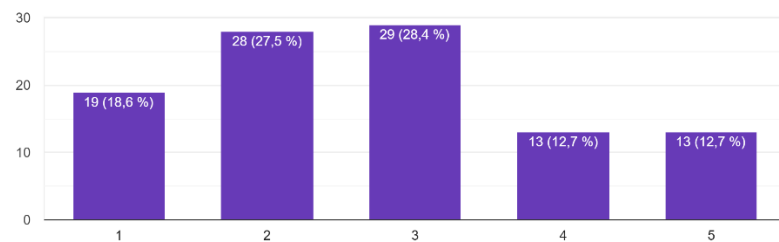
Prefiero comprar en sitios en los que siento que los demás clientes son de una clase social parecida a la mía. / I prefer to shop in places wher... are from a similar social class background to mine.

102 respuestas



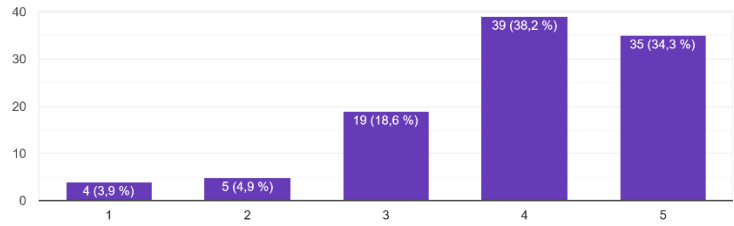
Evitaría comprar algo si creyese que está dirigido a una clase social con la que no me identifico. / I would avoid purchasing something if I thought it was meant for a social group I don't identify with.

102 respuestas



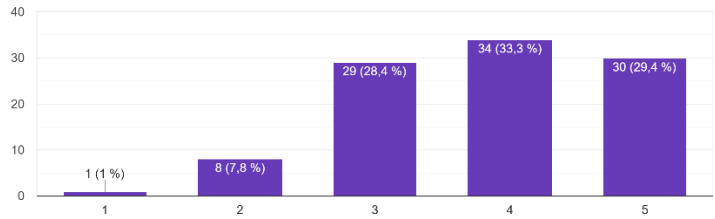
Escojo productos que se ajustan a como paso mi tiempo libre o a mis hobbies. / I choose products that match how I spend my free time or hobbies.

102 respuestas



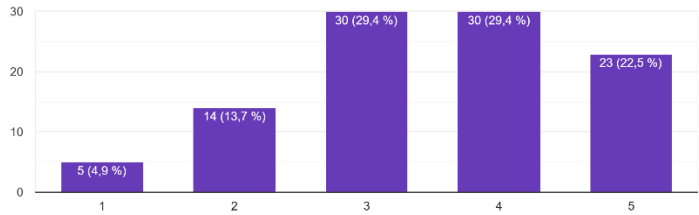
Creo que mis decisiones como consumidor/a reflejan quién soy como persona. / I believe that my consumer choices reflect who I am as a person.

102 respuestas



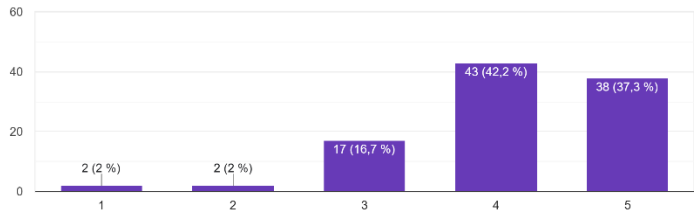
Cambios en mi rutina a menudo hacen que cambie mis hábitos de compra. / Changes in my routine often lead me to change my purchasing habits.

102 respuestas



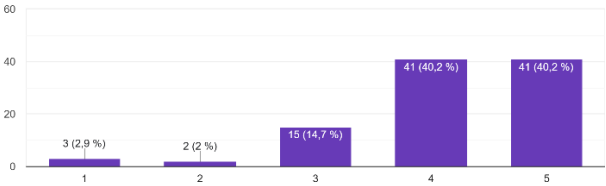
Valoro productos que me faciliten el estilo de vida que quiero tener. / I value products that make it easier to live the way I want.

102 respuestas



Busco comodidad y practicidad en los productos debido a mi rutina diaria. / I look for convenience and practicality in products because of my day-to-day routine.

102 respuestas



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