# **Chapter 2: External Influences** **Demographics and Social Stratification**

## **Demographics and Demographic Variables**

**Demographics and social class** affect how we shop and what we buy. Factors such as age, income, education, and social status shape our tastes, needs, and how much we can afford. For businesses, understanding these differences helps them connect with diverse groups of consumers. By tailoring their products, ads, and messages, they can match what each target audience values and can afford.

*The Role of Demographics and Social Status in Consumer Behavior and Marketing*

At the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Recognize the role demographic factors play in shaping your consumer behavior.
2. Discuss different generations in the U.S. and how marketing can target each of them.
3. Discuss the role social stratification and socioeconomic factors play in shaping consumer behavior.

Key concepts to remember:

* Demographic and demographic variables:
  + Population size
  + Age Distribution
  + Gender
  + Education
  + Occupation
  + Income
* Subjective Discretionary Income (SDI)
* Cognitive age
* Age cohort and cohort analysis
* Gerontographics
* American generations:
  + Pre-depression generation
  + Depression generation
  + Baby boom generation
  + Generation X
  + Generation Y
  + Generation Z
  + Generation Alpha
* Social status: ascribed vs. achieved status
* Conspicuous consumption
* Upper class, upper-middle class, working class, upper-lower class, and lower-lower class

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## **Age[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Age plays a critical role in what consumers buy and why. Younger consumers often opt for tech products and trendy brands that match their lifestyle and identity. Older adults, on the other hand, tend to focus on practical, long-lasting items. For marketers, knowing how different age groups think and spend helps them create messages and products that resonate with the right audience.

Age significantly changes demand across various product categories, as different life stages come with distinct needs, preferences, and purchasing power. For instance, in the technology sector, younger consumers, particularly Generation Z and Millennials, drive demand for innovative products like the latest smartphones, gaming consoles, and smart home devices. These demographic groups are often early adopters, eager to seek out new features and integrations with social media or AI and are influenced heavily by online reviews and recommendations from influencers.

In contrast, older consumers, e.g. Baby Boomers and Generation X, prioritize practicality and ease of use. They may prefer tablets or smartphones with larger screens and simplified interfaces, and favor devices that support health management, such as fitness trackers, CGMs, or tele-health tools. Their brand choices are influenced more by convenience than the latest trends.

When it comes to health and wellness products, middle-aged consumers, including Generation X and Baby Boomers, lead the demand for health supplements, fitness equipment, and wellness programs. As individuals age, health concerns become more common, prompting many to seek products that promote cardiovascular health and overall wellness. On the other hand, younger adults, Millennials, and Generation Z in particular, focus on preventative measures and more holistic health approaches. They favor organic foods and fitness apps while supporting sustainability and ethical sourcing to a larger extent than older generations.

In the housing and home improvement sector, young adults, especially Millennials, often seek affordable housing options and modern apartments suitable for first-time homebuyers. They prioritize energy-efficient homes and smart technology that enhances convenience and sustainability. Older adults, including Baby Boomers, frequently downsize, resulting in increased demand for accessible housing solutions, such as single-story homes or apartments equipped with accessibility features, alongside products like grab bars and walk-in tubs that cater to safety and mobility needs.

In summary, age influences demand in various product categories through shifting preferences and purchasing power linked to different life stages. By understanding these dynamics, companies can tailor their products and marketing strategies to better meet the needs of their target audiences, enhancing customer satisfaction and driving sales.

*Example - Age and Smartphone Choice*

Age impacts consumer behavior through varying needs and values at different stages of life, leading to distinct product preferences and purchasing decisions. It significantly influences consumer behavior by shaping preferences, priorities, and purchasing decisions across life stages. For instance, a 15-year-old might prioritize a smartphone with the latest social media apps, flashy design, and affordability, often influenced by peer validation and trends. At 25, young adults typically seek devices that support both their social and professional lives, favoring multifunctional smartphones with advanced camera capabilities for personal and work-related content creation. A 36-year-old may focus on features such as security, usability, and integration with family needs, opting for a smartphone with strong parental controls and sharing capabilities for managing family connectivity. A 44-year-old might value efficiency and reliability, choosing a smartphone that balances performance with professional functionality, appreciating features like a stylus for work tasks. By 75, consumers may prioritize a phone that offers larger text and an easier interface, ensuring that technology is accessible and user-friendly. Lastly, a 90-year-old may make purchasing decisions based on simplicity and support, gravitating towards smartphones with intuitive designs, large buttons, and features that enable easy access to communication tools without complex navigation.

*Example – Age and Skincare Products*

Skincare preferences also change over time, reflecting evolving concerns, lifestyles, and values. For instance, a 13-year-old is likely to focus on affordable products that address common teenage concerns, such as acne and oily skin, often gravitating toward brands marketed as trendy and suitable for younger skin. By age 23, young adults may seek products that promote a radiant complexion and preventative care, favoring lightweight moisturizers with SPF and serums that target early signs of aging. A 35-year-old typically starts to incorporate anti-aging products into their routine, valuing serums and creams that have retinol or peptides to help combat fine lines and support skin elasticity. At 45, consumers may prioritize luxurious formulations that provide deep hydration and target more pronounced signs of aging, such as wrinkles and loss of firmness, often looking for multi-functional products that can simplify their skincare regimen. By age 55, individuals often seek products that soothe and nurture dry or sensitive skin, opting for richer creams and restorative treatments that counteract the effects of hormonal changes. Finally, a 70-year-old may focus on gentle, hydrating products that enhance skin barrier function and provide comfort, frequently selecting brands known for their simplicity, efficacy, and dermatologist recommendations.

### **Cognitive age[[2]](#footnote-2)**

Cognitive age refers to how individuals perceive their own age, which may not align with their chronological age. For example, a 50-year-old active woman who exercises regularly might feel youthful and may behave more like a 30-year-old in her consumption patterns (e.g. in terms of fashion choices, rock climbing gym membership, or adventure travel), whereas e.g. a 35-year-old man leading a more sedentary lifestyle might feel like a 50-year-old and choose to e.g. invest in a new TV, a comfortable recliner, and Netflix subscription, instead of a gym membership and travel. Therefore, cognitive age is a more important driver of consumer behavior than one’s chronological age. Cognitive age can significantly impact lifestyle choices and product preferences. Brands that recognize and cater to consumer perceptions of cognitive age can better engage their audiences.

*Chico’s – Case Study – Cognitive Age[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Cognitive age impacts how individuals relate to brands and products, often leading them to choose items that align with their self-image and lifestyle aspirations rather than solely their biological age.

For example, consider the clothing brand Chico's, which primarily targets women aged 40 and older. Chico's has successfully tapped into the concept of cognitive age by promoting its styles in a way that resonates with women who feel younger than their chronological age. The brand emphasizes vibrant colors, modern cuts, and trends that appeal to women looking to express their youthful identities, regardless of the number of candles on their birthday cakes.

Chico's marketing campaigns often feature models who reflect not just the age of their target demographic but also embody a spirited lifestyle. They use messaging that encourages self-expression, confidence, and embracing one’s unique individuality. By doing so, the brand recognizes that its audience may feel more youthful and energetic than society typically associates with their actual age group.

Additionally, Chico's offers versatile clothing that can be styled in many ways, catering to the cognitive age of consumers who want fashionable options that align with their desired self-image. This strategy ensures that women who shop at Chico's can find clothes that not only flatter their physique but also align with their aspirations to feel stylish.

Through this approach, Chico's effectively uses the cognitive age concept to resonate with consumers, fostering a deeper connection that encourages brand loyalty and repeated purchases. Instead of solely defining their audience by age, they appeal to the self-perception and lifestyles of their customers.

***Reflect***

1. How does cognitive age influence brand choices and marketing strategies?
2. Think of people in your family or social circle - Can companies target those consumers based on how young or old they feel rather than their chronological age?

### **Age Cohort and Cohort Analysis – American Generations[[4]](#footnote-4)**

Age cohorts are groups of individuals born around the same time who share similar experiences. They share values and expectations shaped by significant historical events, technological advancements, and cultural shifts. Cohort analysis examines how different cohorts respond to marketing based on their shared experiences. Understanding these differences enables marketers to craft messages and products tailored to cohort’s distinct preferences and needs. In the context of American consumer behavior, different generations show unique traits influenced by their upbringing and societal changes[[5]](#footnote-5). Below are the main generational cohorts:

*Table 1: American Generations: Characteristics, Key Historical Events, Technological Innovations, and Cultural Shifts[[6]](#footnote-6)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Generation | Birth Years | Characteristics | Key Historical Events | Cultural Shifts | Technological Innovations |
| Pre-Depression Generation | Born before 1930 | Experienced the Great Depression and WWII | The Great Depression, World War II | Emphasis on frugality and family values | Household appliances (fridge, washing machines), radio |
| Depression Generation | 1930-1945 | Values security and resilience | The Great Depression, WWII, post-war prosperity | Rise in consumer culture | Television, antibiotics, consumer electronics |
| Baby Boom Generation | 1946-1964 | Optimistic, individualistic, consumer-driven | Post-WWII economic boom, civil rights, Vietnam War | Civil rights, gender equality, counterculture | Personal computer, color television |
| Generation X | 1965-1976 | Independent, skeptical, adaptable | End of the Cold War, rising divorce rates, internet emergence | Increased diversity, focus on work-life balance | Personal computing, internet, mobile phones |
| Generation Y (Millennials) | 1977-1994 | Tech-savvy, value-driven, socially conscious | Digital age rise, 9/11, Great Recession | Emphasis on experiences over possessions | Smartphones, social media, streaming services |
| Generation Z | 1995-2009 | Digital natives, pragmatic, socially aware | Digital revolution, political polarization, climate awareness | Focus on mental health, diversity, activism | Social media evolution, AI, virtual reality |
| Generation Alpha | 2010-2025 | Developing, raised in technology and social change | Future global developments (pandemics, climate) | Increased awareness of well-being | AI, touch-screen technology, smart devices |
| Generation Beta | 2025- | Yet to be fully defined, expected technological advancements | Future global developments | Predicted emphasis on sustainability and inclusivity | Advancements in robotics, AI, personalized learning tools |

#### **American Generations – Implications for Consumer Behavior and Marketing**

*Table 2: American Generations: Signature Products, Brands, Media Used, Successful Advertising Appeals, Influencers, and Key Marketing Strategies[[7]](#footnote-7)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Generation | Signature Products | Favorite Brands | Media | Influencers | Advertising Strategies |
| Pre-Depression Generation | Durable goods, classic cars | Ford, General Electric | Radio, newspapers, early television | Bing Crosby, Eleanor Roosevelt | Appeals to nostalgia and security; Emphasis on reliability and family values. |
| Depression Generation | Home appliances, cars | Whirlpool, Chevrolet | Television, print media, radio shows | Lucille Ball, Ronald Reagan | Focus on trust and quality;  Highlight durability and emotional storytelling. |
| Baby Boom Generation | Cars, fashion brands | Levi's, Nike, Coca-Cola | Television, radio, emerging digital platforms | The Beatles, Oprah Winfrey | Aspirational and emotional messaging; Use nostalgia to connect with consumers. |
| Generation X | Early PCs, casual wear | Apple, The Gap, Nike | Cable TV, online content | Kurt Cobain, Winona Ryder | Emphasis on authenticity and realism; Straightforward and honest messaging. |
| Generation Y (Millennials) | Smartphones, eco-friendly products | Apple, Patagonia, TOMS | Social media platforms, streaming video | Kim Kardashian, Casey Neistat | Highlight social awareness and transparency; Engage via social media and influencer partnerships. |
| Generation Z | Beauty products, tech gadgets | Fenty Beauty, Samsung, Apple | TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Snapchat | James Charles, Emma Chamberlain | Focus on diversity and authenticity; Interactive content that aligns with social justice themes. |
| Generation Alpha | Educational toys, tech devices | LEGO, LeapFrog, Fisher-Price | Streaming services, educational apps | Ryan Kaji, Blippi | Promote educational value and interactivity; Emphasize fun and engagement through innovative learning. |
| Generation Beta | Educational tech, eco-friendly goods | Emerging brands in tech and sustainability | Likely immersive content | Emerging experts in innovation | Leverage informational content and curiosity; Engage through storytelling and immersive experiences. |

To illustrate how cohort analysis can help us understand the impact of age on the consumer decision-making process, let us use the example of **buying a smartphone**, a product that varies in features and appeals across different generations. We will analyze how **Generation Y (Millennials)**, **Generation X**, and **Baby Boomers** would approach this process.

*Example – American Generations Purchasing a Smartphone[[8]](#footnote-8)*

**Millennials (Generation Y)** recognize the need for a new smartphone due to outdated technology, battery issues, or the desire for upgraded features such as a better camera or improved social media integration. They will conduct extensive research online on social media, tech blogs, and review sites to compare the latest models, read reviews, watch unboxing videos, and seek recommendations from trusted influencers. In evaluating alternatives, Millennials compare various brands based on features, price, and brand reputation, prioritizing aspects that enhance their social media presence. After thorough research, they might be swayed by promotional deals or financing options, often opting to buy online or through an app for convenience. Following the purchase, they may share unboxing experiences on social media, review their new smartphone, and contribute to discussions about the product, influencing their peers.

On the other hand, **Generation X** recognizes the need for a new smartphone when their current device no longer meets their needs, such as frequent performance issues or incompatibility with work applications. They typically use a mix of online research and in-store consultations, value hands-on experiences, and visit retail stores to test devices while checking online reviews and comparison sites. This generation often evaluates options based on practicality, price, and functionality, appreciating brands that offer reliable products with good customer service. When making their purchase decision, Generation X is inclined to look for good deals through promotions or bundling with service plans and prefers to buy from trusted retailers to ensure support and warranty availability. After the purchase, they focus on how well the smartphone integrates into their daily lives, responsibilities, and use it for both work-related tasks and family communication.

Finally, **Baby Boomers** might recognize the need for a new smartphone when they struggle with their current devices due to complexity or outdated technology. They often engage in a straightforward search for information, and rely on traditional sources such as family and friends, and may prefer visiting physical stores to ask staff for recommendations and demonstrations. When evaluating alternatives, Baby Boomers prioritize ease of use and reliability rather than advanced features, and favor brands known for customer service. They might prefer to buy in-store where they can examine the device and receive help with questions about the product. After buying, they tend to concentrate on how well the smartphone meets their communication needs and seek help from family or friends to understand any new features.

This comparison highlights how different generations approach the consumer behavior process differently based on their values, technological comfort levels, and shopping preferences.

*Table 3: How Different Generations Make Consumer Decisions[[9]](#footnote-9)*

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Stage in the Consumer Decision-Making Process** | **Millennials (Generation Y)** | **Generation X** | **Baby Boomers** |
| **Need Recognition** | | Recognize the need for upgraded features (e.g., better camera). | Identifies the need for a new smartphone due to performance issues. | Realize that the current smartphone is too complex or outdated. |
| **Information Search** | | Conduct online research using social media, tech blogs, and reviews. | Uses a mix of online research and in-store consultations. | Rely on friends, family, and in-store demonstrations. |
| **Evaluation of Alternatives** | | Compare brands based on features, price, and social media relevance. | Evaluates options focusing on practicality and customer service. | Prioritize ease of use and reliability over advanced features. |
| **Purchase Decision** | | Are swayed by promotions; prefer online or app purchases. | Looks for good deals through planning and prefers trusted retailers. | Prefer buying in-store for direct support and recommendations. |
| **Post-Purchase Behavior** | | Share unboxing and reviews on social media, influence peers. | Focuses on functionality for work and family communication. | Seek help from family to understand new features; evaluate ease of use. |

Reflect

* 1. Which of the American generations do you belong to? Do you identify with the key characteristics of this generation? Why? Why not?
  2. How should companies adjust their marketing strategies to appeal to Generation Z versus Baby Boomers?
  3. What are some examples of brands that successfully cater to multiple generations?

### **Gerontographics[[10]](#footnote-10)**

Gerontographics is a marketing segmentation approach that specifically focuses on understanding older adults' behaviors, preferences, and motivations. This segmentation method extends beyond mere demographic factors, such as age and income, to examine psychological, lifestyle, and social influences that shape the consumption patterns of this age group. By analyzing these aspects, marketers can develop tailored strategies that resonate more deeply with older consumers[[11]](#footnote-11):

1. **Psychographics**: Gerontographics consider older adults' values, lifestyles, and attitudes. This includes how they perceive aging, the importance they place on self-image, and their preferences for products and services that enhance their quality of life. For example, an older consumer might prioritize health and wellness products that promote vitality.
2. **Life Stage Segmentation**: Rather than viewing older adults as one homogenous group, gerontographics recognize the diversity within this population based on life stages. For instance, individuals in their 60s may be vastly different in terms of lifestyle and consumer behavior compared to those in their 80s or 90s. Some may be retired and focused on leisure, while others are engaged in work or caregiving responsibilities.
3. **Social Influences**: The social environment plays a crucial role in shaping the purchasing decisions of older adults. Family dynamics, friendships, and community involvement can influence their buying behavior. For instance, adult children may affect their parents’ purchasing decisions about technology or healthcare products, while social networks can foster preferences for certain brands or services.
4. **Technology Adoption**: Gerontographics also examines how different segments of older adults adopt innovative technologies. While some may resist change or struggle with digital tools, others may be enthusiastic about adopters, using smartphones, apps, and online shopping to a greater extent. Understanding these differences can aid marketers in designing user-friendly products and services.
5. **Health and Wellness Focus**: As individuals age, their health and wellness become more key factors in their consumption decisions. Products that promote physical health, mental well-being, and lifestyle improvements (like fitness programs, wellness apps, or home modifications) are often more appealing. Marketers can leverage gerontographics to highlight the benefits of products in improving overall well-being and supporting independence.

In a rapidly aging population, gerontographics offer critical insights that can help brands better serve older adults, ensuring they feel valued and understood. By focusing on diverse preferences, experiences, and lifestyles of this group, marketers can create effective strategies that enhance engagement, improve customer satisfaction, and ultimately drive sales in this essential market segment. Understanding gerontographics allows brands to move beyond stereotypes and build meaningful connections with older consumers, affirming their relevance in today's marketplace:

By understanding the specific needs and motivations of different segments of older adults, brands can **tailor their advertising messages** to resonate emotionally and practically. For instance, campaigns for health-related products can highlight testimonials from peers or portray relatable scenarios that demonstrate the product’s efficacy in enhancing daily life. Insights from gerontographics can **inform product design**, ensuring that offerings meet older adults' physical and cognitive needs. This might include creating user-friendly gadgets, designing comfortable apparel, or providing supportive health products that cater to common age-related concerns. Knowing where older adults prefer to shop and how they like to receive information can guide **distribution strategies**. While online shopping may be convenient for many, traditional retail experiences still hold value for those who appreciate face-to-face interactions and personal service. Addressing specific needs and values of older consumers can lead to stronger **brand loyalty**. When brands take the time to understand and cater to the market segments based on their lifestyle and not age alone, they foster trust and long-term relationships with their customers.[[12]](#footnote-12)

## **Gender**

Gender influences buying behavior, as men and women tend to have different purchasing motivations, preferences, and decision-making approaches. Marketing strategies often target genders differently, catering to their unique preferences[[13]](#footnote-13).

### **Product Preferences**

Men and women tend to have different product preferences and priorities when it comes to shopping. For example, men often gravitate towards products that enhance functionality and performance, such as technology items, tools, and automotive products. They may favor brands that highlight efficiency, innovation, and strength. In contrast, women typically focus on products that emphasize aesthetics, emotional connection, and social value. For instance, when buying clothing or beauty products, women might prioritize style, brand reputation, and how items complement their lifestyle or self-image.[[14]](#footnote-14)

### **Shopping Habits**

Shopping habits also vary between genders. Women are more likely to engage in social and emotional shopping experiences, often shopping with friends or family and discussing their purchases with others. This communal aspect can be linked to a desire for validation and social engagement. Men, on the other hand, often approach shopping as a task-oriented activity, looking to make quick decisions and minimize time spent in-store. This difference can influence the marketing strategies brands employ. For instance, men might respond better to straightforward advertising that emphasizes product features, while women may engage more with messaging that tells a story or fosters social interactions.[[15]](#footnote-15)

### **Brand, Loyalty, and Trust**

Gender also plays a role in brand loyalty and trust. Women tend to show higher brand loyalty, often sticking with brands they feel understand their needs and values. They are more likely to engage with brands that present themselves authentically and transparently, especially in terms of social responsibility and ethical practices. Men, in contrast, may find themselves swayed more by performance and price, leading them to switch brands depending on promotions or product reviews. This distinction highlights the importance of building strong brand relationships with female consumers while focusing on value and reliability for male consumers.[[16]](#footnote-16)

### **Advertising**

The effectiveness of advertising can differ based on gender. Advertisements aimed at women often capitalize on emotional appeals, emphasizing personal stories, relationships, and community aspects. Campaigns featuring relatable scenarios or aspirations can resonate deeply with female audiences. For men, advertising tends to focus on rational appeals, highlighting practicality, strength, and technical specifications. Marketing strategies may employ humor or assertiveness to connect with male consumers, reflecting traditional masculine values and interests[[17]](#footnote-17).

*Table 5: How Advertising Targets Men and Women*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Advertising Targeting Men** | **Advertising Targeting Women** |
| **Colors** | Uses darker, muted colors (navy, black, gray) to convey strength and sophistication. Examples include car ads using dark blues or blacks. | Features softer, lighter colors (pastels, warm tones) to evoke warmth and comfort. Brands like L'Oréal use light, feminine colors. |
| **Fonts** | Employs bold, sans-serif fonts (e.g., Helvetica Bold, Impact) that suggest decisiveness and strength. GQ Magazine uses strong modern fonts. | Uses elegant, serif or script fonts (e.g., Georgia, Brush Script) to create an inviting, friendly feel. Brands like Kate Spade favor stylish typography. |
| **Shapes** | Incorporates angular, geometric shapes (squares, rectangles) to imply strength and stability. Sports car ads use definitive angles to suggest power. | Uses softer, rounder shapes (circles, curves) that evoke warmth and inclusiveness. Beauty brands like Avon use rounded visuals to suggest gentleness. |
| **Words Used** | Uses assertive, action-oriented language that conveys strength and accomplishment ("Unleash your power"). Brands like Under Armour use motivational slogans. | Employs emotional and empathetic language that emphasizes relationships and empowerment. Brands like Always focus on empowerment phrases like "Like a girl." |

Cultural shifts about gender roles also affect consumer behavior. As societal expectations evolve, marketing strategies must adapt. For example, more men are becoming involved in traditionally women-dominated product categories, such as cosmetics and home goods, prompted by changing views of masculinity. Similarly, as women gain more financial independence, they may lean toward products that empower them or reflect their personal values with increasing emphasis on financial products, technology, and lifestyle[[18]](#footnote-18).

## **Education, Occupation, Geographic Factors, Social Stratification, and Income**

Education, occupation, geographical factors, and income are interrelated factors that collectively shape consumer behavior by influencing preferences, needs, and purchasing power, as well as the types of products chosen. [[19]](#footnote-19)

Higher **education** levels often lead to better job opportunities, resulting in higher incomes. This not only empowers consumers to invest in quality products and prioritize sustainability but also determines where they live. For instance, well-educated individuals may settle in urban areas where job opportunities and amenities align with their lifestyle aspirations, influencing their purchasing habits. They often gravitate toward premium product categories, such as organic foods, high-end electronics, and luxury fashion, and prefer retailers like Whole Foods, Sprouts, Trader Joe’s, Apple Store, or Nordstrom that reflect their values of quality and sustainability. They are also more likely to be seen at a local farmer’s market. In contrast, individuals with lower levels of education may focus more on practicality and price when making brand choices. Their purchasing decisions often center around essential items, such as affordable groceries, basic clothing, and household goods, primarily sourced from mainstream retailers like Walmart, The Dollar Store, or Dollar General. The products they choose are usually influenced by immediate needs rather than long-term investment considerations. Furthermore, consumers in lower-income brackets tend to rely more on promotional offers, value-brand products, and convenience rather than seeking out high-end or specialty items.[[20]](#footnote-20)

**Occupation** further influences spending habits. Professionals in high-paying fields, such as healthcare or technology, may opt for luxury goods and services that reflect their status, often consulting expert reviews, online forums, or social media influencers for their purchase decisions. Conversely, blue-collar workers may rely on a combination of value-oriented advertisements, traditional promotions, and recommendations from friends and family when choosing their products.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Geographic factors** also shape consumer behavior. Urban consumers often engage with trends and brands influenced by a fast-paced lifestyle, emphasizing novelty and innovation, while rural consumers are more likely to prioritize functionality and reliability in their purchases. Additionally, the values held by consumers affect their shopping preferences: those who are educated and affluent may place a high value on ethical sourcing and sustainability, while those with lower education and income might prioritize affordability and practicality.[[22]](#footnote-22)

### **Social Status and Conspicuous Consumption**

Social class acts as a powerful determinant of purchasing habits and preferences. Those in higher social classes often show distinct consumption patterns, favoring premium brands and luxury experiences that signify status and exclusivity. This trend toward conspicuous consumption reflects a desire to highlight wealth and social standing. Individuals invest in high-end products such as designer clothing, luxury cars, and exclusive memberships at upscale clubs not merely for their utility but primarily as a means of signaling affluence and social prestige. Conversely, consumers in lower social classes typically prioritize functionality and affordability. They are more inclined to seek out products that meet basic needs without expecting elevated branding or luxury connotations, often leading them toward generic brands or value-driven retailers where prices are more accessible.

Moreover, individuals may purchase goods to express their group identity or to fit into their social circles, reinforcing their belonging to a particular social or cultural group. Brands that resonate with specific identities—through lifestyle imagery, cultural representation, or ethical practices—can cultivate strong consumer loyalty among individuals who see themselves reflected in those values. For example, younger consumers belonging to the Millennial or Gen Z demographics may favor brands that promote sustainability and social justice, aligning their purchases with their lifestyle and ethical beliefs.

### **Aspirational Purchases[[23]](#footnote-23)**

One cannot forget, however, about the aspirational nature of purchases, as not all purchases made by individuals in a lower social class are driven by necessity. Some consumers strive for upward social mobility, which can influence their purchasing behaviors. This demographic may invest in certain brands or luxuries, not only for personal enjoyment but as a means of signaling their status or aspirations to others. For instance, a working-class individual might save to buy a luxury handbag from a brand like Gucci or Louis Vuitton, viewing their purchase as a personal milestone and a statement about their ambition and success. The visibility of such purchases allows individuals to project an image of affluence, even if they are not in the upper class.

From a marketing strategy perspective, brands can effectively promote aspirational products by carefully crafting messages that resonate with consumers' desires for status, identity, and social acceptance. Companies can create powerful connections with their target audiences by using emotional branding techniques that highlight personal stories of success, achievement, and lifestyle aspirations. Advertisements featuring relatable figures who have "made it" or aspirational imagery that evokes a desirable lifestyle can inspire buyers to envision themselves in those scenarios, encouraging them to invest in products that symbolize their aspirations.

Moreover, scarcity and exclusivity can be effective tactics for enhancing the allure of aspirational products. Brands may employ limited editions or invite-only events to foster a sense of urgency and desire, reinforcing the idea that these products are a privilege for those within a certain class. Additionally, using social media and influencer marketing can amplify this effect, as endorsements from popular figures can help confirm the desirability of a brand. This targeted marketing strategy compels consumers to pursue aspirational products in the hopes of elevating their social status and cultural identity, driving sales and brand loyalty among diverse consumer segments.

### **Social Structure in the U.S.[[24]](#footnote-24)**

Understanding consumer behavior across different social classes—upper class, upper-middle class, working class, upper-lower class, and lower-lower class—reveals key differences in values, product choices, preferred retailers, information sources, and effective marketing strategies. Each class reflects unique characteristics that influence how they engage with the marketplace.

*Social Structure in the U.S.*

#### Upper Class

The upper class often exhibits a tendency towards conspicuous consumption, where purchases are made primarily to signify wealth and status. This group values exclusivity, prestige, and quality and is likely to support brands with a strong heritage or artisanal quality. As a result, upper-class consumers tend to purchase luxury items, such as designer fashion, high-end electronics, and luxury automobiles. Preferred retailers include prestigious luxury brands like Gucci and Chanel, as well as exclusive boutiques and high-end department stores such as Saks Fifth Avenue or Neiman Marcus. When it comes to information sources, upper-class consumers often rely on word-of-mouth recommendations, professional consultants, and high-end lifestyle publications. So, brands targeting this group use aspirational marketing strategies that emphasize exclusivity and heritage, often engaging in selective advertising in upscale magazines and elite events.

#### Upper-Middle Class

The upper-middle class focuses on quality and functionality but also leans toward premium products that reflect status and success. This demographic values education, career achievement, and experiences, making them more likely to prioritize products that offer both quality and innovation. Consumers in this category often buy high-quality electronics, upscale home goods, and health-conscious food options. They often shop at retailers like Nordstrom and Pottery Barn, as well as specialty health food stores such as Whole Foods Market. Information sources for this class typically include reviews and comparisons found in online resources, lifestyle blogs, and consumer reports. Marketing aimed at the upper-middle class often emphasizes product quality, value, and detailed testimonials, and often focuses on social media and influencer marketing to build engagement.

#### Middle Class[[25]](#footnote-25)

The middle class looks to balance affordability and quality, prioritizing value in purchasing decisions. They appreciate well-made products but remain budget-conscious, often opting for mid-tier brands that offer reliability without excessive cost. Common purchases include brand-name but reasonably priced clothing, durable home goods, and family-oriented experiences such as travel or entertainment. Preferred retailers for this demographic include stores like Macy’s, Best Buy, and Costco, which offer a mix of quality and affordability. Information sources for the middle class typically include online reviews, consumer reports, and word-of-mouth recommendations. Marketing strategies targeting this group focus on practicality, reliability, and cost-effectiveness, often using promotions, loyalty programs, and relatable advertising campaigns that emphasize smart spending and family values.

#### Working Class

Working-class consumers prioritize practicality and affordability in their purchasing decisions, often focusing on value for money. They value reliability, functionality, and products that enhance everyday life. Common purchases in this group include everyday household items, budget-friendly groceries, and practical clothing. Working-class consumers tend to shop at discount retailers such as Walmart or Target. Information sources for this group often include traditional advertising, flyers, and promotions, along with recommendations from friends and family. Effective marketing for this demographic uses straightforward messaging that highlights discounts and practical benefits, often delivered through ubiquitous media like television and local advertisements.

#### Upper-Lower Class

The upper-lower class shows a mix of desire for upward mobility while balancing financial constraints. This group values accessibility and practicality but harbors aspirations toward improving their financial situation. They may purchase second-tier brands or products in the mid-range of quality, such as value-focused electronics and budget-friendly clothing. Common retailers for this demographic include Kmart, Ross, and other discount department stores. Information sources may involve local advertisements, social media promotions, and community recommendations. Marketing strategies for this demographic often emphasize affordability while creating aspirational narratives that showcase success stories resonating with their desire for upward mobility.

#### Lower-Lower Class

Individuals in the lower-lower class focus primarily on immediate needs, often making purchasing decisions based on necessity rather than desire. They value basic utility, and their choices are frequently driven by immediate financial constraints. Common purchases are basic food items, second-hand clothing, and essential household goods. This group often shops at thrift stores, dollar stores, or discount chains like Dollar Tree. Information sources for lower-lower class consumers often rely on community centers, word-of-mouth recommendations, and sales promotions. Effective marketing for this group typically focuses on deep discounts and promotional offers, using simple, relatable messaging that highlights product utility.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table: Social Structure in the U.S. and Consumer Behavior | | | | | | |
| **Social Class** | **Consumer Behavior** | **Values** | **Products** | **Retailers** | **Information Sources** | **Marketing Strategies** |
| **Upper Class** | Tends towards conspicuous consumption. | Values exclusivity, prestige, and quality. | Luxury items like designer fashion and high-end electronics. | Exclusive boutiques, Saks Fifth Avenue, Chanel. | Word-of-mouth, professional consultants, high-end lifestyle publications. | Aspirational marketing emphasizing exclusivity and heritage. |
| **Upper-Middle Class** | Focuses on quality and functionality, seeking premium products. | Values education, career achievement, and experiences. | High-quality electronics, upscale home goods, health-conscious foods. | Nordstrom, Pottery Barn, Whole Foods Market. | Online reviews, lifestyle blogs, consumer reports. | Emphasizes product quality, value, and detailed testimonials. |
| **Middle Class** | Balances affordability with quality, prioritizing value. | Values financial stability, comfort, and practicality. | Brand-name but reasonably priced clothing, durable home goods, family-oriented experiences. | Macy’s, Best Buy, Costco. | Online reviews, consumer reports, word-of-mouth recommendations. | Focuses on practicality, reliability, and cost-effectiveness, often using promotions, loyalty programs, and relatable advertising. |
| **Working Class** | Prioritizes practicality and affordability. | Values reliability and functionality. | Everyday household items, budget-friendly groceries, and practical clothing. | Walmart, discount retailers. | Traditional advertising, flyers, promotions, and recommendations from friends/family. | Straightforward messaging highlighting discounts and practical benefits. |
| **Upper-Lower Class** | Mix of desire for upward mobility with financial constraints. | Values accessibility and improving the financial situation. | Second-tier brands, mid-range electronics, and budget clothing. | Kmart, Ross, and discount department stores. | Local advertisements, social media promotions, and community recommendations. | Emphasizes affordability with aspirational narratives. |
| **Lower-Lower Class** | Focuses on immediate needs; purchasing based on necessity. | Values basic utility. | Basic food items, second-hand clothing, and essential household goods. | Thrift stores, dollar stores, Dollar Tree. | Community centers, word-of-mouth recommendations, and sales promotions. | Steep discounts and relatable messaging that highlights utility. |

In summary, each social class has distinct consumer behaviors and values that influence their product choices, preferred retailers, sources of information, and marketing strategies. By recognizing these differences, brands and marketers can tailor their approaches to effectively engage with and meet the needs of each specific demographic, ensuring that their products resonate with the unique preferences and lifestyle considerations of diverse consumers.

***Reflect***

1. How does your social class affect the perception of luxury vs. Essential products?
2. In what ways do aspirational purchases shape your consumer behavior?

***End-of-Chapter Self-Reflection***

1. How do your demographic characteristics (age, income, education) influence your own purchasing decisions and the types of products you buy?
2. Which brands or products do you associate with your generation, and why?
3. Have you ever made a purchase influenced by social status or aspirational factors? How did that impact your perception of the product?
4. How do you perceive your cognitive age versus your actual age, and does that affect your buying habits?

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Parts of this textbook have been adapted, revised, and remixed from the following OER resources:

* Introduction to Advertising: Advertising Practices  
  <https://oer.galileo.usg.edu/business-textbooks/10/>
* Launch! Advertising and Promotion in Real Time by Solomon et al. 2009: <https://open.umn.edu/opentextbooks/textbooks/launch-advertising-and-promotion-in-real-time>
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