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Navigating the Marketplace: An In-Depth Look at Social, Economic, and Environmental Factors Shaping Consumer Choices

Consumer behavior is a fascinating area of study that incorporates various aspects of human decision-making and consumption patterns. The dynamics of consumer behavior are complex, and influenced by social, economic, and personal factors. Through the examination of two interviews conducted with different informants Amy and Jane Doe, this paper explores the relationship between social influences, geographic location, budget constraints, environmental responsiveness, and self-expression through consumption habits. Through the lens of the informants' experiences and perspectives, we examine how peer pressure shapes purchasing decisions, the impact of budget limitations on spending habits, the rise of environmental awareness in consumption patterns, and the role of clothing as a form of self-expression and individuality. By taking a deeper analysis of these themes, the purpose of this paper is to provide insights into the complexities of consumer behavior in society.

The first interview I will be analyzing is the Jane Doe interview, which was conducted with a 21-year-old female, who at the time was a junior at James Madison University. The first pattern that was very apparent throughout the interview was the informant's awareness of the various social factors that affected her buying decisions. Social influence plays a vital role in shaping consumer behavior, which is made evident by the interviewee's heavy dependence on the opinions and preferences of her friends when making purchasing

decisions. This theme draws attention to the impact of peer pressure and social dynamics on individual choices, particularly in the area of fashion and lifestyle purchases. The informant seeks validation and guidance from her social circle, indicating a desire for approval and a sense of belonging within her peer group. This reliance on social influence suggests that consumer decisions are not only driven by personal preferences or rational considerations, but are more guided by social norms, trends, and the desire to fit in or conform to group expectations. One example of social influence on purchasing decisions from the interview was when the informant discussed her shopping habits with friends. She mentions that her friends frequently bought clothes from Urban Outfitters, with some of her friends purchasing items at least once a month. Despite the informant not having a job, she acknowledged that her friends shop more often and spend more money on clothes. This conveys a level of social pressure to keep up with her friends' shopping habits, even though she may not have the same financial means. She also mentions seeking her friends' opinions when shopping, both when they're together at the mall and when she's alone, this shows how her friends' preferences heavily affect her own purchasing decisions.

During the interview, it was made clear that the informant had a hard time managing her money even with her budget constraints. As stated previously, the informant is not employed and claims to be somewhat mindful of her budget. Yet, she admits to her impulsive spending habits on items she feels are essential for her happiness, such as drinks, vaping, and partying. This shows a conflict between wanting things now and the reality of limited financial resources. The informant's tendency to put experiences and social activities first, over material possessions, suggests a willingness to sacrifice long-term financial stability for short-term enjoyment. Additionally, she relied on her mother to buy her clothes, therefore, she had to get clothes that her mother approved of which exhibits the control financial dependency has on consumer choices. Overall, the dynamics between financial

constraints, personal desires, and social influences in shaping individual spending habits were prevalent during the interview.

The interview touches upon the theme of environmental awareness in consumption, showcasing the informant's consideration of sustainability in her shopping habits. She expressed a preference for high-quality and longer-lasting items over fast fashion products, acknowledging the negative environmental effects associated with fast fashion. By avoiding brands like SHEIN, which is linked with unethical practices of child labor, and prioritizing purchases from environmentally friendly companies, the informant demonstrates a sense of responsibility towards the planet. Her preference for thrifting and recycling clothes also reflects a conscious effort to reduce waste and minimize her environmental footprint. All in all, the interview points out the value of environmental consciousness in shaping consumer behavior and the growing trend toward sustainable consumer practices.

The interview also dives into the ritualistic and therapeutic aspects of shopping, revealing how it serves as more than just a way of purchasing goods for the informant. Through activities like shopping for plants and potting them with friends, the informant finds a sense of comfort and joy in the process itself. This ritualistic engagement with shopping holds deeper meaning, providing emotional fulfillment and a sense of purpose. For example, she describes how she and her roommate would set aside time every other Sunday to share their hobby of buying plants together, potting them, and caring for them while enjoying each other's company. This ritualistic activity not only fosters bonding between them but also offers an escape from the stresses of daily life. This is also seen in her enjoyment of receiving packages from online orders, particularly from Amazon, and highlights the anticipation and excitement associated with shopping as a form of self-care. The act of unboxing and discovering new items brings a sense of delight, contributing to the informant's overall sense of well-being. In summary, the interview illustrates how shopping can bring joy, deepen connections, and provide a break from life's struggles.

The last theme I analyzed from the interview with Jane Doe was gender and self-expression through clothing. Throughout the conversation, the informant navigates societal norms and personal preferences in her fashion choices. She discusses her tendency to lean towards comfortable, oversized, and colorful clothing, deviating from traditional feminine clothing. She expressed a desire for comfort and functionality over societal expectations of femininity, stating:

I: Well, a lot of women's clothing is very tight and uncomfortable and... not even useful most of them have fake pockets which doesn't even make sense. So, I just want to dress like a man! Men don't have to wear tight... not everything is just all tight and uncomfortable honestly. [Strelser, p. 2, 2002]

This quote emphasizes the informant's rejection of restrictive gender norms and her preference for clothing that aligns with her comfort and personal style. The informant recalled times during her childhood experiences of resisting her mother's attempts to enforce feminine attire by trying to make her wear dresses, indicating a longstanding desire for self-expression and freedom in her clothing choices. By embracing a style that goes against conventional gender norms and prioritizes comfort and individuality, the informant challenges societal expectations and is free to express herself through clothing.

Now that we've gained some insights into consumer behavior regarding spending habits, budget constraints, and personal expression through clothing, I will delve into another intriguing conversation. In this next interview conducted with Amy, another 21-year-old female who attended JMU, we continue our analysis of consumer behavior by examining how social influences and financial circumstances come together to shape consumption patterns. While the context may differ, the underlying themes of budget management and social influence remain consistent between the two interviews, offering valuable insights into consumer decision-making.

The interview with Amy depicts the role of social influence and group dynamics in guiding consumer behavior. Amy constantly going out with her friends to parties and clubs illustrates how peer interactions and group decisions impact her free time activities and spending habits. From pre-gaming together to coordinating outfits, Amy and her friends engage in collective rituals that reflect shared preferences and social togetherness. Moreover, Amy's role as the designated makeup artist of the friend group represents the significance of individual skills and expertise in group dynamics, as her friends rely on her makeup abilities for their collective "get ready" rituals. Ultimately, the interview highlights the relationship between social networks and individual preferences in shaping consumer patterns.

Ritualistic behaviors appear to be significant components of her social interactions and leisure activities. Amy describes pre-gaming rituals with her friends before attending parties or clubs, emphasizing the importance of these routines in setting the mood for the evening. These rituals involve gathering at someone's place, coordinating outfits, doing hair and makeup together, and collectively preparing for the night out. Amy also shares ritual-like activities with her mom through activities such as going to the movies, which reflects more of a familial ritual that strengthens their bond. Through these examples, the interview demonstrates how rituals are important aspects of Amy's social life, contributing to a sense of belonging and shared identity within her friend group and family.

In the interview, the informant discusses brand preferences, indicating a shift in buying behavior affected by financial constraints. This reflects the theory of planned behavior, attitudes toward a brand are shaped by beliefs about the brand's attributes and subjective norms, reflecting social pressures and group dynamics. Her mother's preference for name brands, associating them with higher quality, differs from Amy's shift to store-brand products due to their affordability. This is reflected during the discussion where Amy states:

I: Oh my mom, buys a lot of name brands, she says she can tell the difference, I can't tell the difference personally, but she is positive. With

like food and lotion and medicines, she says that there is like a huge difference, but other stuff doesn't really matter, I guess. When I first started shopping down here I got the same brands we would always get, but now I have been price checking lately, and getting the store made stuff cause it is cheaper and stuff. [Judd, p.7, 2021]

This illustrates a transition in brand preferences driven by financial constraints rather than intrinsic brand loyalty. This shows how economic factors shape consumer behavior and brand choices.

In closing, the interviews taught us a lot about how people shop and spend money. The first interview exemplified how friends and social groups can influence what we buy, while the second interview talked about how tight budgets can change our shopping habits. Both interviews remind us that what we buy and why we buy things depend on a mix of what we need, what we can afford, and what our friends think. Understanding these factors is invaluable for marketers seeking to understand and cater to diverse consumer needs and motivations. Marketers can tailor their strategies to resonate with consumers on a deeper level. Incorporating these insights into marketing campaigns can create stronger brand loyalty, enhance customer satisfaction, and ultimately drive business success.