

RPTSS 2018
International Conference on Research Paradigms
Transformation in Social Sciences

RESEARCH ON YOUTH CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM IN IRKUTSK AND KRASNODAR

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Abstract

The article studies social factors influencing consumer behavior of youth in the university education system. Based on the surveys of fee-paying students of Irkutsk National Research Technical University and Kuban State University, factors influencing the selection of a university and an educational program as well as impacts of reference groups are analyzed. Reliable (opinions of relatives, friends, Internet) and unreliable (advertising, print media) information sources are analyzed. The article demonstrates that the education strategy, student opinions and motives are influenced by reference groups. The degrees of influence of parents and friends on the selection of an educational strategy and consumer goods are compared. The article concludes that students prefer to make independent conscious choices based on their learning and professional interests, while parents play only consultative roles. Among educational program selection criteria, there are professional interests, quality of university education and job prestige. The data obtained in the article can contribute to the formation of a more effective educational policy of the University in respect of first-year students, end to realize career with students and applicants.

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Keywords: Consumer behavior, youth, university education, university, reference groups, selection factors and criteria.



1. Introduction

In the modern Russian society, young people are a large and dynamic consumer group. Youth of today are not always financially independent of their parents. However, they are involved in active everyday consumption influenced by a fashion factor and want to invest in their future (e.g., they purchase apartments, pay for their education).

The concepts of consumption and consumer behavior are traditionally studied from economic, sociological and marketing perspectives. Accordingly, attention is paid to the consumption structure and income distribution, factors influencing consumer behavioral patterns, consumer preferences and needs.

From a sociological perspective, the selection of fee-paying educational programs can serve as an example of consumer behavior of graduates. As far as education is a long-term product, analysis and comparison of alternatives take much time, and because future students are financially dependent, their parents engage in the selection process.

Group communication is one of the most significant factors influencing consumer behavior. Consumer behavior of youth is influenced by different communities. Values, attitudes, rules of reference group often have a huge influence on the young.

Consumer behavior of youth has some peculiarities associated with changing social roles. At this stage, they attain independent a professional, economic and social status that influences their positions in the social and economic structure of the society. Consumer behavior of youth is influenced by the social status of their families (parents' income levels, education levels, professions) and social environment.

2. Problem Statement

In classical consumption theories, the social and economic status is considered as a determinant of consumer behavior, and differences in consumption are considered as a function of the class structure of the society. For example, in Weber's theory, the concept of lifestyle, used in the social stratification theory, is based on the three parameters: property, power and prestige. According to Weber, lifestyles are products of status subcultures involving values, rules, traditions, and a system of symbols and behavioral skills (Gaydenko, 1991).

Blackwell, Miniard, and Engel (2007) distinguish between seven stages of consumer decision-making: need awareness, selection, assessment, purchase, consumption, post-purchase assessment, disposal.

The work by Bourdieu (2001) is the most important modern research on consumption issues. The researcher divides the social structure into social classes but uses his own system of criteria. A class is referred to as a total of agents holding similar positions and having similar practices, lifestyles and a habitus. A system of practices determined by a habitus is a lifestyle. Bourdieu (2001) argued that consumption is a type of differentiation of individuals, a criterion of social stratification.

According to Baudrillard (1995), there are no rational consumers making free choices. Any choice is determined by the structure of the consumer society focusing on abstract values. When selecting goods, an individual demonstrates social differences, and as far as support of these differences is a requirement of the civilization, a need turns out to be unsatisfied.

Consumer behavior is conditioned by a number of factors: demographic, geographic, economic and cultural. These factors can be divided into two groups: external and internal. The external factors are social stratification factors (social status, origin, etc.), group communication, family, household. The internal factors are characteristics of information perception and treatment, learning, memory, motivation, emotions, personal beliefs, consumer resources, knowledge and relations. Physical and social environment, consumption purpose, previous states are a special group of factors (Suzdaleva, Badamshina, & Akhmetova, 2013). Thus, culture, social status, social environment, life circumstances and some other factors can influence consumer behavioral patterns.

Reference groups are used as models to assess one's own behavior. For example, R. Merton argues that reference groups determine behavioral standards which are used by individuals to assess their own attitudes. The researcher uses the concepts of membership degree and group orientation. The group membership involves identity as a group member, frequency of communication, perception of an individual as a permanent group member by other group members (Merton, 1991).

The influence of social groups on consumer behavior of youth can be different (information, values which can become a basis for a consumer choice, etc.).

3. Research Questions

Need for making economic choices and distributing available resources are a part and parcel of human lives. As far as material resources are often limited, particularly in youth, they have to be distributed between current and future consumption, goods of different price categories and quality. This applies especially to big-budget purchases.

As reference groups form values and beliefs, consumers treat friends and relatives as the reliable sources of information. Reliable information delivered by members of the reference group reduces a risk of disappointing purchases. Personal influence is increasing when a consumer lacks information to make the right choice; finds it difficult to assess the product and opinions of the reference group are used to "pass the buck"; all sources of information, except for oral information, are considered unreliable; receiving information from an informed individual is less time consuming (Aleshina, 2006).

Among dominant values of youth are personal career success and financial independence. They aim to gain freedom of choice of consumer behavioral patterns and improve living standards. These values determine the drive to purchase social attributes.

For illustrative purposes, let us analyze the influence of reference groups on the selection of university educational programs. Education is a specific service with a long-term effect. Besides, the selection of an educational program is connected with the selection of a professional field and a position in the "adult" world. In our country, attitudes to university education have changed, but its role is still crucial (Studenikina, 2016). Fee-paying educational programs are selected by school graduates with different academic results. Large federal universities even select students among people who can pay for their education. Besides, in some educational fields, there are no state-funded places, which assumes that even students with high academic scores will have to pay for their education.

Thus, the influence of reference groups on the selection of a model and conditions of studies is significant but can be different from the influence of reference groups on the selection of everyday products.

4. Purpose of the Study

Fee-paying university education is a special product. It involves obtaining benefits in the long run (job, social status, advantages in the labor market, etc.). It is an expansive purchase (at least, in large state universities). Young people are inexperienced purchasers and users of these services. Besides, in most cases, parents pay for their education. So, choices are not impulsive, they are influenced by reference groups.

The study aims to analyze the influence of different social and economic factors and reference groups on the selection of educational programs and universities.

5. Research Methods

As a part of the research, the authors held a student opinion poll in two large Russian universities - Kuban State University and Irkutsk National Research State Technical University. Only students who pay fees for their education were examined. The opinion poll was held in November 2017 among the students of the program "International relations" (Kuban State University) and students of Institute of Economics, Management and Law and Institute of Architecture, Construction and Design (Irkutsk National Research State Technical University).

100 students of different academic levels were questioned. Respondents were the consumers of commercial educational services. This fact makes it possible to take into account their opinions when developing ideas of motives and factors of consumer behavior of this social group. For research purposes, a questionnaire was developed.

Methods of mathematical statistics in Microsoft Excel were used due to the nature of a polling method. At the data summarizing stage, general logical methods were applied to create a clear image of the phenomenon under study, describe its peculiarities, and classify data obtained.

6. Findings

The questionnaire included questions about the degree of confidence in different sources of information. Among the sources of information were TV, print media, Internet, and people. In general, students have confidence in relatives and friends (49 %), in particular 50 % of Irkutsk students and 48 % of Krasnodar students rely on people to help them make decisions. Thus, the opinion of a reference group is the most reliable source of information for students. 57% of students have confidence in Internet which is predictable as far as these students were born in the digital era. Among the most reliable sources of information are leaders of public opinion (42 %), relatives and friends (39 %), social networks (38 %), and TV (35 %). In both universities, the answers are similar and correspond to the total findings, which speaks for the consensus of opinions and general trends. Advertising is the least reliable source of information. 28 % of respondents strongly distrust it, 44 % of respondents rather distrust it. 52 % of respondents rather distrust newspapers and magazines, 16 % of students strongly distrust them. Leaders of the public opinion (46 %), TV (46 %) and social networks (42 %) also have high rates of distrust. In general, it is possible to determine average rates of trust/distrust by different sources of information (Figure 1).



Figure 01. Average information source reliability degree evaluation (on a scale from one to four)

For research purposes, it is necessary to determine which opinion was crucial when respondents were selecting an educational program. According to the opinion poll results, their own opinions were most crucial (87 %) which demonstrates independency and individualization of youth when it comes to education and career paths. Parents' opinions are important for 33 % of respondents. Thus, family relations are critical for career choices. This trend is typical of both cities, i.e. there are no geographical differences.

Opinions of friends and social networks were disregarded by the respondents when selecting educational programs. 45 % of students selected an option "not very important" for friends' opinions and 66 % selected an option "not important" for social networks. Other relatives (38 %) and mass media (38 %) are also unreliable sources of information. Average evaluation of the influence of different factors on respondents' opinions when selecting educational programs correlates with general trends of students' answers by the selection totality and clusters (Figure 2).

At the same time, when purchasing consumer goods (clothes, electronic devices, etc.), young people rarely consult parents (11.5% of the respondents do it). Friends' opinions are weightier (24% of purchasers take them into account (Scheglovskaya, 2017). Such differences might be due to the significance of university education. When purchasing clothes, young people tend to look like their friends, while education is indicative of social status and lifestyle of their families.

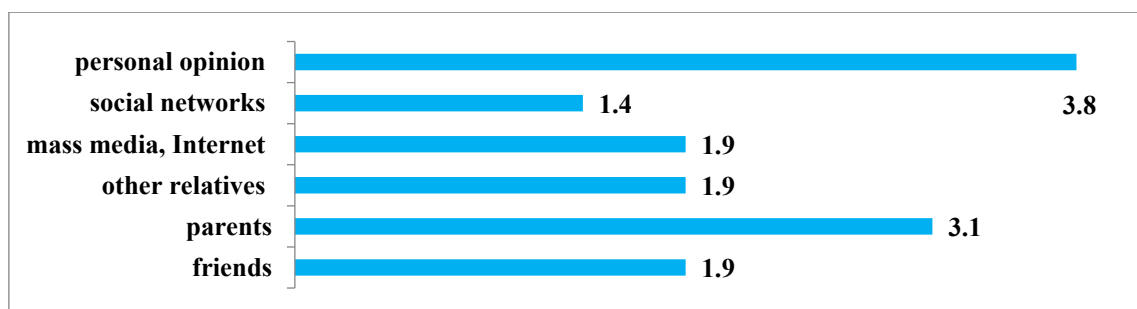


Figure 02. Average evaluation of the influence of factors on respondents' opinions when selecting educational programs (on a scale from one to four)

Parents and other relatives and friends (during the teen years) are important for socialization of an individual. Students were asked to choose three causes why they address relatives and friends when selecting a university, a department and an educational program. Their answers are as follows: aim to make a reasonable choice (84 %), information search (59 %), need for approval (35 %), other sources of

information are not reliable (10 %), “buck passing” (3 %). Students are ready to make reasonable and right choices based on the sources of information mentioned above. They understand that except for opinions of relatives and friends, there are other sources of information. Most students do not shift responsibility to other people; they are ready to make independent decisions.

When selecting universities and educational programs, the choices of young people are guided by the following criteria: personal interests (82 %) education quality (73 %), occupational prestige (48 %) (Figure 3). This distribution of answers is typical of both Irkutsk and Krasnodar students.

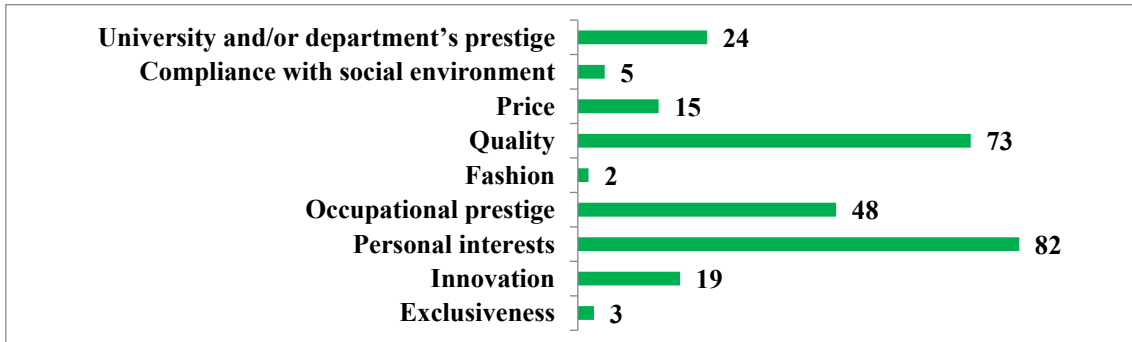


Figure 03. Significance of university education parameters, (%)

The analysis of consumer behavior of students has to take into account different factors influencing education choices (Butakov, Guzik, & Sidorova, 2013). The students assessed each factor by the degree of significance. For 64% of respondents, the most important factor was “professional interests”. Employment security is important for 46% which speaks for their aim to plan their near future, ability to size their possibilities in relation to professional skills. Parents’ opinions are rather important for 46 % of respondents, price affordability is crucial for 51 %. Among the least significant factors are friends’ opinions (not important– 36 %, not very important – 50 %), and university and department advertising (not important – 37 %, not very important – 48 %). In both cities, the answers correlate with the total evaluation and distribution following the distribution of the selection totality.

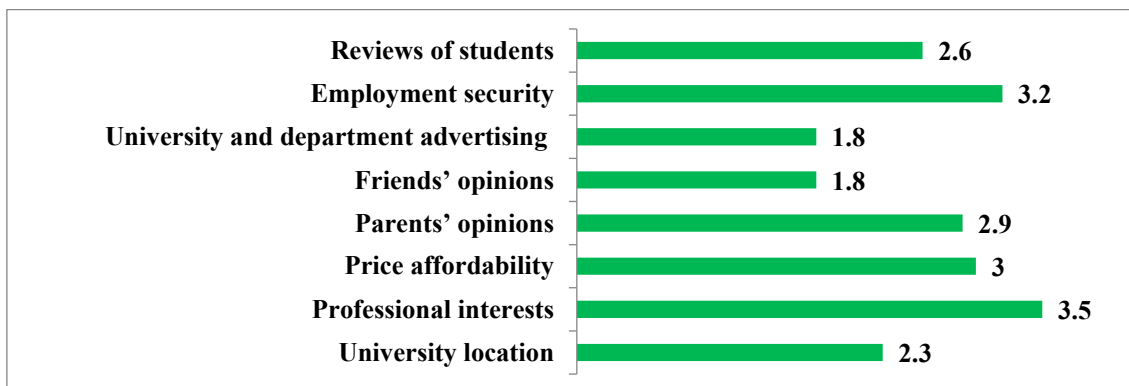


Figure 04. Average evaluation of the significance of factors when selecting educational programs, (%)

Taking into account the influence of all the factors on the selection of educational programs, the students were asked who made ultimate decisions. 63% of respondents made their own decisions and 36% of students made decisions together with their parents. Only 1% of students followed their parents' choices.

To find out who pay education fees is also important for the present study. Despite the fact that most student made their own career choices, education fees are paid by their parents (77 %). Only some of them earn to pay for their studies (8 %). Some students pay for their studies using maternity capital funds (9 %), and 3 % of respondents had to take a loan.

7. Conclusion

Consumer behavior of Russian youth is influenced by social and economic factors and opinions of different reference groups.

The opinion poll did not identify significant differences in positions of young people from different Russian regions, but identified general educational program selection trends. Purchasing a product, the consumer bear expenses and expect to get maximum consumption benefits. The lack of personal experience and need for parents' approval stimulate young consumers to receive a preliminary assessment of their choices. The most reliable sources of information are relatives, friends and websites. The least reliable sources are advertising and print media.

Reference groups can assess the product and give advice on the purchase. Young people address to their friends and relatives in order to make reasonable choices and search for new information. In this case, parents are subjects who transfer their own personal experience and consumer values and pay for goods and services.

The selection of a university and an educational program is an important and responsible decision for young people as it will influence their careers and social status. Parents are the most important reference group influencing the selection of educational services. Besides, parents pay for these educational services. However, their opinions are not ultimate. For the respondents, their own opinions and learning interest played more crucial roles.

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