An Interpretation of The Widening Scope of The Reference Groups: An Indian Perspective

Laxmi Gupta
Associate Professor
Deptt. of Sociology,
Govt. P.G. College,
Dholpur, Rajasthan

Abstract

A reference group is one which is referred to by an individual in the society for the evaluation of his achievements, roles, performance, aspirations and ambitions. Its significance lies in the fact that it motivates the individual to have higher goal orientations in life so as to enjoy life quite blissfully and desirably. It enables him to evaluate whether he is right or wrong. Human life is a complex phenomenon which has much pressure on the individual in several forms. He wants the whole world to be encompassed within his efficiencies and abilities, while the realities are entirely different. It is his natural instinct to learn from the various sources and to imitate the things that can allow him maximum satisfaction in life. Even the non-membership groups, i.e. the groups one does not belong to, may click to one to be imitated for several purposes. While living amidst several people in the society, man comes closer to the socio-cultural and economic modes of living of others. Some of the people impress him in a way that he wishes to adopt all those modes of living in his own life for the sake of betterment in life. Power, wealth, qualities, education, profession, orientations, luxuries, sense of modernity and westernization, name and fame etc. are the things associated with the individuals or their groups that magnetically attract others towards them and force them to imitate them to enjoy the same blissful and reputed life in the society. Everybody feels attracted, but it is the youth that gets attracted most. He chooses certain people in various walks as his role-models, and imitates them and their styles to look like them.

The Indian youth whether rural or urban, literate or illiterate, modern or primitive, advanced or backward likewise has the tendency to imitate the various known or unknown reference groups that govern his behavior and that lead him to follow in his life the same traits and features as the members of the groups of their preference have.

The paper is a theoretical study, and encompasses in it, several aspects associated with the reference groups in the context of the Indian youth.

Keywords: Interpretation, Magnitude, Widening, Primary Groups, Perspective, Aspirations, Urbanism, Globalization, Multi-National Concerns

Introduction

Robert K. Merton hypothesized that individuals compare themselves with reference groups of people who occupy the social role to which the individual aspires. Reference groups are groups that people refer to when evaluating their own qualities, circumstances, attitudes, values and behaviors.

Man is an imitative animal. The desire to imitate other individuals or groups is instinctive in him. When one finds another person progressing in life, he also desires to progress likewise. He compares himself with others and begins behaving like them in order to reach their status and position. Such an imitative behavior is called reference behavior. Under such behavior one relates oneself to the other individuals or groups, and tries to adopt their values and standards. The individuals or groups whose behavior is imitated are called reference groups. Such an imitation is found at both the individual and group levels.

The youth in India as in other countries of the world, is on a constant move to the globalized world which is the need of time. For it, he is ready to transform himself through high personal goals, higher orientations and ambitions. He is ready to all those around him who are on

a constant move to progress, well being, prosperity, reputation, name and fame. He is ambitious to encompass the wealth, knowledge, prosperity, luxuries etc. to himself so as to be most popular, rich and wealthy. He seeks it through the various reference groups that surround him influencing and motivating him to attempt to attain higher goals and life-standards in order to enjoy his life successfully in the society.

Objectives of the Study
1. To learn about the various classifications of the social groups
2. To be familiar with the classical sociological tradition about the social groups
3. To apply the insight into the Indian social system
4. To interpret the various social groups being found in the Indian social system
5. To trace out the ongoing tendencies of the Indian youth about their aspirations, career orientation, ambitions and their bent of mind on the expected fields of career
6. To have a feel into the attributes of the various popular groups
7. To attempt to learn how and why the youth is desirous of imitating the behavioral traits of the various groups
8. To attempt to learn the short-termed consequences of the impact of the reference groups on the personality of the youth
9. To foresee the positive and the negative impact of the imitation on the future and career of the youth
10. To interpret a causal-effect relationship of the issue in the context of Indian youth

Review of Literature

Jiatao Li & Fiona Kun Yao (2010) in their study 'The role of reference groups in international investment decisions by firms from emerging economies' firms from emerging economies seem to rely on copying the entry decisions of peers from their home country, especially in locations where the risk of government meddling is greatest. The key findings of this research suggest that firms from emerging economies are more likely to invest in China when peers from the same country or from other emerging economies have already done so. In particular, the investment patterns of multinationals from Asian emerging economies serve as a more salient reference point than those of firms from non-Asian emerging economies. In addition, host location policy uncertainty and home country institutional distance moderate these influences, such that mimicry is enhanced under conditions of higher policy uncertainty and narrower institutional distance.

J. Turcinkova, J. Moisidis (2011)- Impact of Reference Groups on the Teenagers' Buying Process of Clothing in the Czech Republic find that there are diff erences in the buying behavior of clothing between respondents in the age 13–15 and 16–19 years. The group of 13–15 years old teenagers doesn't consider clothing brands as a very important criterion when choosing particular piece of clothing, while for the older group brands matter. The 16–19 year old ones are signifi cantly more infl uenced by

their friends and opinion leaders, while the for the younger group this infl uence comes not from their peers, but mostly parents.

Daiane Scaraboto (2012) in How Consumers Persuade Each Other: Rhetorical Strategies of Interpersonal Influence in Online Communities observes that persuasive messages are central to interpersonal influence in online communities, where consumers interact mainly through text. Consumers employ these rhetorical strategies to influence each other's consumption decisions, report consumption decisions back to the community, and to gauge their influence on each other's choices.

Satish Chandra Ojha (2016) in 'Societal Groups as a Precursor of Consumer Durables Brand Selection in Indian Online Retail Market' observes that lack of precise understanding of the Brand selection pattern and buying habits of the consumer has often led to marketing failures. So there arises a need to fill this lacuna. In a highly segmented market of India with different races, subcultures, religions, castes, linguistic groups and geographical variations, it is only natural that significant differences' exist with regard to the selection preference of the consumers. Every individual knows some people in the society who become their idols in due course of time and they are highly affected by their line of thoughts so owing to that they seek their opinion in every corner of life ,be it choosing the products from an online retail shops or going for the utility or durability of that product. Societal groups comprise of people that individuals compare themselves with. Since people differ in culture, society, income, demography, psychology and their psychographs in a continent. Therefore, it is very essential to understand the impact they have because of the various groups on the buying behaviour.

Semila Fenelly Fernandes & Dr. Rajesh Panda (18 April 2018) in Social Reference Group Influence on Women Buying Behaviour: A Review find that women are influenced by Informational reference group, Utilitarian reference group and Value-expressive reference group though their influence vary across different women segments. Studies have indicated that Informational and Utilitarian reference group influence are the most pervasive amongst women purchases. Women as a segment is more influenced by reference group compared to men during product and service purchases as they are more socially connected compared to their male counterparts. Young working women usually carry out joint decisions with their spouse in comparison to a housewife where the husband has been the dominant decision maker.

Hypothesis
1. The general classification of the social groups is- Primary Group. Secondary Group & the Reference Group
2. Charles Cooley, the associate of the classical tradition, conceptualized only the primary group
3. The secondary group was interpreted as a result of the concept of the primary group propounded by Cooley

4. Robert K. Merton, another associate of the classical tradition, hypothesized the concept of the reference group
5. Reference groups are universal and are imitated in all the societies of the world
6. In the Indian social system there are several reference groups that influence the members of the society
7. The popular reference groups are the groups of the industrialists, business tycoons, bureaucrats, administrators, royal families, and the groups known for high socio-cultural standards
8. Like others, the Indian youth is ambitious, aspirant and imitative
9. The features of each and every reference group are different
10. The instincts of the individual forces him to imitate the behavioral traits of the various groups
11. The short-termed consequences of the imitation of the reference group behavioral features are pleasing to the individual
12. Imitation of the behavioral modes of the reference groups has both the positive and the negative effects on the personality of the individual

Methodology

Grounded in the theoretical implications propounded by Robert K. Merton, and designed in a way so as to explore the individual's bent of mind on the behaviors of the progressing people, the study is chiefly qualitative. For the study, observation of the author made casually and the accessibility to the related literature through the various popular sources, form the basis of the study. The author adopted the following steps for the successful completion of the study-Selection of the theme and subject, setting of the specific objectives, thorough study of the related literature, analysis of the literature in the context of the Indian social system, personal casual observation of the youth in the surrounding areas, application of the laid down theoretical implications to the personal observation, preparation of the draft and arrival at major findings. The non-participant observation mode was adopted in order to be familiar with the selected youth's bent of mind on the various behaviors of the various reference groups. For the sake of the scientific spirit of the study, objectivity was observed.

Research Questions

1. What is a social group?
2. What is the significance of the social group for an individual?
3. What is a reference group?
4. What are the implications of the reference group?
5. How many reference groups are there?
6. Should the individual imitate the traits of the reference groups?
7. If yes, why?
8. If no, why not?
9. For what purposes does the individual join the reference groups?
10. Can an individual join only one reference group or several reference groups at a time?
11. Does the individual's joining several reference groups at a time cause role-conflict in him?

12. When are the effects of joining the reference groups positive?
13. When do the reference groups have a negative impact on the youth and society
14. What are the various trends of the Indian youth's joining the various reference groups?
15. Is the reference group theory helpful to the individual or to the society at large or to both?
16. If the reference group theory helpful to the individual, how?
17. If it is helpful to the society at large, how?
18. What reference groups should be imitated by the individual?
19. What reference groups should be avoided?
20. What is the socio-practical implication and significance of the reference group theory?

Findings

1. With or without purpose gathering of two or more than two persons falls into the category of social group.
2. Social groups allow the individual to survive successfully in the society with a reciprocal interdependence and interaction
3. Reference groups are the groups known for their progression and high standards, and which the others want to join while in practical life
4. The natural instincts of the individual force him to attain higher horizons every hour. For it he sets certain standards to attain. Under the influence of the already set standards of certain groups and people, he is on move to attain them in his real life
5. The number of the reference groups is not fixed or limited.
6. The members of the various contextual lower groups imitate the higher socially approved groups
7. For the sake of personality development and life-progress, it is essential for everyone to keep on moving towards the higher standards in the respective fields keeping the eye on the set standards of some selected reference group
8. The tendency of the individual is to join the reference group is instinctive, and he imitates them for several purposes
9. Media plays a vital role in bringing the individual in close association with the varied reference groups
10. The individual's sense of imitation is not limited. He imitates several reference groups while living in the society for several purposes
11. Role conflict is caused by the individual's imitating several reference groups together
12. Both inter and intra role conflicts are caused as a result of such an imitation of the several reference groups at a time
13. The impact of such an imitation is positive as it leads the individual to higher goals and orientations
14. The impact of imitating the reference groups is negative as it makes the individual over ambitious, and the individual starts behaving going beyond the limits

Remarking An Analisation

15. The ongoing trends of the imitation of the reference groups reveal that the Indian youth imitates the behavior of the royal people, celebrities, film stars, industrialists, administrators, doctors, engineers, business tycoons and all those who seem to be having higher standards of life

16. The reference group theory is helpful to both individual and society as it links the individual to the higher ambitions and goals which eventually result into the social progress and social dynamics

17. Only such reference groups should be imitated that are accessible to the individual and that are good to the society, and those that are harmful to the individual and the society at large should be avoided

18. The reference group theory has its socio-practical implication and importance in the context of India as it can bring the members of the society closer to the various mainstream of progress and development required for a globalized society at present

Conclusion

Group is an unavoidable truth of man. It is the living in groups that allows the people to satisfy their several needs that they develop during the course of life. No one is perfect enough to do everything himself, so for it he needs people around him in order to supply him the things that one fails to get himself. There are oft-discussed three divisions of social groups- the primary group, the secondary group and the reference group. The primary groups like family, neighbourhood and classroom are the ones that allow man to have and develop informal and relations with the other members having a common sharing of things; the secondary groups are those that link the people with others formally for some specific purpose with or without direct relations and contacts. The reference groups are the influencial groups that have a deep influence on the people in a way that the imitators believing the members of such groups as their role-models, follow their life style in confirming their close resemblance to them. Reference groups are imitated and joined under the command of the man's natural instincts that pressurize him to attain higher horizons in various walks of life. Generally the groups that have positive features become the reference groups. Reference groups contribute tremendously to the personality development of man motivating him to join the mainstream by setting higher goals for himself. Media plays an immense role in bringing the people closer to the various reference groups. When through the media the culture of the elites is served repeatedly, it tempts the people to adopt it for themselves. Since all the reference groups are open to all, joint imitation of several reference groups together causes role-conflict in the people. Anyway, in most of the cases, the impact of such an imitation is positive. However, it cannot be denied that certain reference groups have a negative impact on the people and society at large. To the criminal minder person, the groups with negative and destructive features become the reference groups. Such a person governed by the devilish attitude imitate the devilish traits of such groups and move towards criminality, violence and deviation.

Getting motivated by the media, the Indian youth is imitating the behavior of the royal people, celebrities, film stars, industrialists, administrators, doctors, engineers, business tycoons and all those who seem to be having higher standards of life. The reference group theory is helpful to the society despite many of its weaknesses. It is suggested that only such reference groups should be imitated that are accessible to the individual within circumstantial limits and that are good to the society, and those that are destructive society like the group of terrorists, should not be imitated at all in the interest of the peace and harmony of the nation.

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