

**PSYRGGU 2019**  
**Psychology of subculture: Phenomenology and Contemporary  
Tendencies of Development**

**CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AS AN INDICATOR OF SUBCULTURE  
MEMBERSHIP**

T.V. Folomeeva (a), F.N. Vinokurov (b), V.V. Nagornova (c)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Lomonosov Moscow State University, ul. Mohovaya, 11 Str. 9, 125009, Moscow, RUSSIA, e-mail:  
tfolomeeva@gmail.com

(b) Lomonosov Moscow State University, ul. Mohovaya, 11 Str. 9, 125009, Moscow, RUSSIA, e-mail:  
fediav@mail.ru

(c) Lomonosov Moscow State University, ul. Mohovaya, 11 Str. 9, 125009, Moscow, RUSSIA, e-mail:  
nagornovavv@gmail.com

*Abstract*

The study is devoted to the problem of finding the most meaningful characteristics that describe a person, and in particular, our personal features through our choices in the context of consumption. Since the end of the 20th century, appeared an approach that considers consumption as one of the important determinants of our identity and subculture involvement. The purpose of this study was reconstruction of lifestyle, preferences and belonging to various subcultures based on our consumption. The data we obtained were collected from the social network “VKontakte” and included both social demographic indicators of users and their individual preferences, which we operationalized through their subscriptions. The results of the analysis showed that significant differences between different gender groups and groups with different material wealth. Contrary to previous theories, subcultures are not an attribute of youth groups only. The blurring of the boundaries of both the subcultural communities and their functions for society, as well as the nature of identity in modern conditions, led to an increase in the average age of the participants in the subculture. For each of the selected groups there is its own leading activity connected with a consumption and associated with the whole sphere of other preferences of nominal subculture members. Significant age and generation differences were not found. We planned continue this issue in cross-cultural design to differentiate personal determinants from historical context and cultural features.

© 2019 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.UK](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.UK)

**Keywords:** Consumer behaviour, identity, subculture, transitive society, social network.



## 1. Introduction

What more reflects our identity: gender and age, or chosen activities, objects, and interpersonal relationships (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995)? The question can be considered controversial, but the recent studies show that our choices, consumer attitudes and behavior bring meaning to our lives, and we, as researchers, can draw conclusions about the values and interests underlying this (Arif, 2019).

Studies of subcultures and consumer behaviour have their own long history in psychological science and were studied independently, only in the 21st century having become two closely researched phenomena. And now consumers of specific product categories may be considered as members of a subculture: the products of their choice become a repository of meanings within a group, and in-group relationships are also supported by means of consumption rituals (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

The link between these two phenomena can be represented as a continuum, where at one of the poles is the triumph of consumerism and demonstrative behaviour and at the other - the complete isolation and secrecy of the subculture from an outsider (Schiele & Venkatesh, 2016).

Detailed attention to the transition of socio-cultural movements or subcultures to the main trends of culture development is given in researching of socialization process (Guselceva, 2016). We are more interested not in the cultural transformations of modern society, but in the role of individual choice in the process of constructing our own identity. As we can see, for a modern individual this process is creative.

In the era of globalization, researchers note an intensive process of change in value orientations, evolving information and subcultural space, transforming meanings, standards and behavioural norms, and as a result, a diffused identity phenomena (Martsinkovskaya, 2013). On the other hand, the consequence of the postmodern culture is an ability to choose sophisticated and extraordinary lifestyles and identities (Wheaton, 2000). Consumption satisfies hunger for a conceptual space in which one could construct an ideal image of self and own's life meanings (Kozinets, 2001).

An interesting contradiction can be noted in the subcultures of the 21st century. Subcultures cease to oppose themselves to the public culture anymore, they are increasingly included in it with the full scope of the cultural practices of the consumer society. Modern subcultures are rarely looking for differences with the dominant culture, but more often they're seduced by external well-being, success, aesthetics and appearance, elevating bourgeois idleness to the highest value (Novak, 2016). We are more often confronted with subcultures that are based solely on consumption (Leight, Peters, & Shelton, 2006).

Through consumption, modern music subcultures hunt for new members, both at individual and cultural levels (Ulusoy & Schembri, 2018). This process has undergone significant change with increasing Internet penetration, which greatly facilitates the process of copying subcultural signs, making them publicly available. As a result, the true representatives of the subculture, striving to preserve their uniqueness, choose more implicit and secret practices to preserve their identity (Litvina, 2019).

Eating behaviour is one form of maintaining of identity that remains hidden from being discovered and copied by large social groups. The inconspicuous nature of everyday behaviours is a new way to resist the mainstream and to protect the intra-group identity from the dominant culture (Cronin, McCarthy, & Collins, 2014). No less important is the fact that everyday routines help to restore the integrity of one's living and become a barrier from the general chaos of the surrounding social environment (Martsinkovskaya, 2017).

In this study, we will pay special attention to everyday consumer practices. The daily routine is the most universal processes, but it preserves the possibility of realizing our unique identity and constructing of our own meanings. And it even applied to the members of small subcultures, who are extremely concerned about maintaining their identities.

Empirical data was collected by us in the VK (VKontakte) social network. In the era of total publicity and transparency, social media becomes the most popular and rich source of data on the “secrets of soul”, rather than questionnaires and projective tests (Grishina & Kostromina, 2017).

Social networking contributes to socialization and the creation of interest groups. The nature of participation in these groups is voluntary - their members always have the opportunity to leave the group. Membership in this kind of groups stimulates the creation of new interpersonal connections and interactions with strangers who have similar views and interests.

Interest is a category explaining the nature of social choice, defining the area of social relations and the principles of social networking, determining the characteristics of consumption and ownership of information. At the same time, as studies show, the formation of individual interests depends on the method of communication. Therefore, we assume that social media, as the richest medium in terms of digital communication formats, allows us to study the interests of participants in all their diversity.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The problem of our research was to uncover the subcultures in social media based on their consumer behaviour. Our previous studies have shown that online consumer communities are fairly stable social groups that unite around common consumer preferences for certain products, services, or brands (Vinokurov, 2012). At the same time, the variety of ways to fulfil the need grants an ability to express oneself through everyday consumption practices (Folomeeva, 2012). The list of consumer communities in social media, in which one voluntarily participates, in our opinion, may reflect the lifestyle of this person, a set of values and membership to a particular subculture, which does not always become a subject of one's reflection. Thus, consumer behaviour, in our opinion, is one of the most stable indicators of belonging to modern subcultures.

## **3. Research Questions**

The main hypothesis of our study was the assumption that participation in the community of consumers of certain goods, services or brands is one of the key indicators of subculture membership.

The operationalization of this hypothesis was done through analysing the subscriptions to communities (or “groups”, or brand “pages”) among a large number of users of social media. We assumed that individual subscriptions will form stable combinations, on the basis of which existing subcultures can be distinguished almost in real time and their proximity to each other can be assessed based on the simultaneous presence of these combinations in social networks user's repertoire.

## 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of our study was to search for combinations of user interests on social media, which may reflect their membership to specific subcultures. Consumer preferences in relation to mainly products and services from the basic basket, that is, from the sphere of everyday and most mass consumption, were chosen as the initial indicator.

## 5. Research Methods

The choice of methods for collecting and analysing data in our study is backed by the need to obtain a current and reproducible slice of consumer preferences in combination with other interests of a large number of users on social media. The social network VK (VKontakte), which is the most popular among Russians (by Mediascope WEB-Index), was chosen as the data source.

Based on the main hypothesis, at the first stage we selected the largest groups on VK social network (by the number of participants), which were devoted to the consumption of the following categories of basic basket: food, clothing, leisure, medicine. In order to increase the representativeness of the data for each category, 22 contrasting groups were selected: healthy food and fast food, mass market clothes and designer items, computer games and theatre as leisure activities, a group of supporters and opponents of vaccination. From each group, 3,000 participants were randomly selected (simple random sampling). A total of 54,984 profiles were obtained. Data collection was carried out through the public API (application programming interface) of the social network and was automated using the Python program and the `vk_api` library.

Next, regardless of the original consumer group, all subscriptions of selected users to groups in the social network VK were analysed. A total of 4,935 unique groups were identified, each of which had at least 100 subscriptions among our sample. To determine the main topic of each group, the title and textual description for each of them were retrieved.

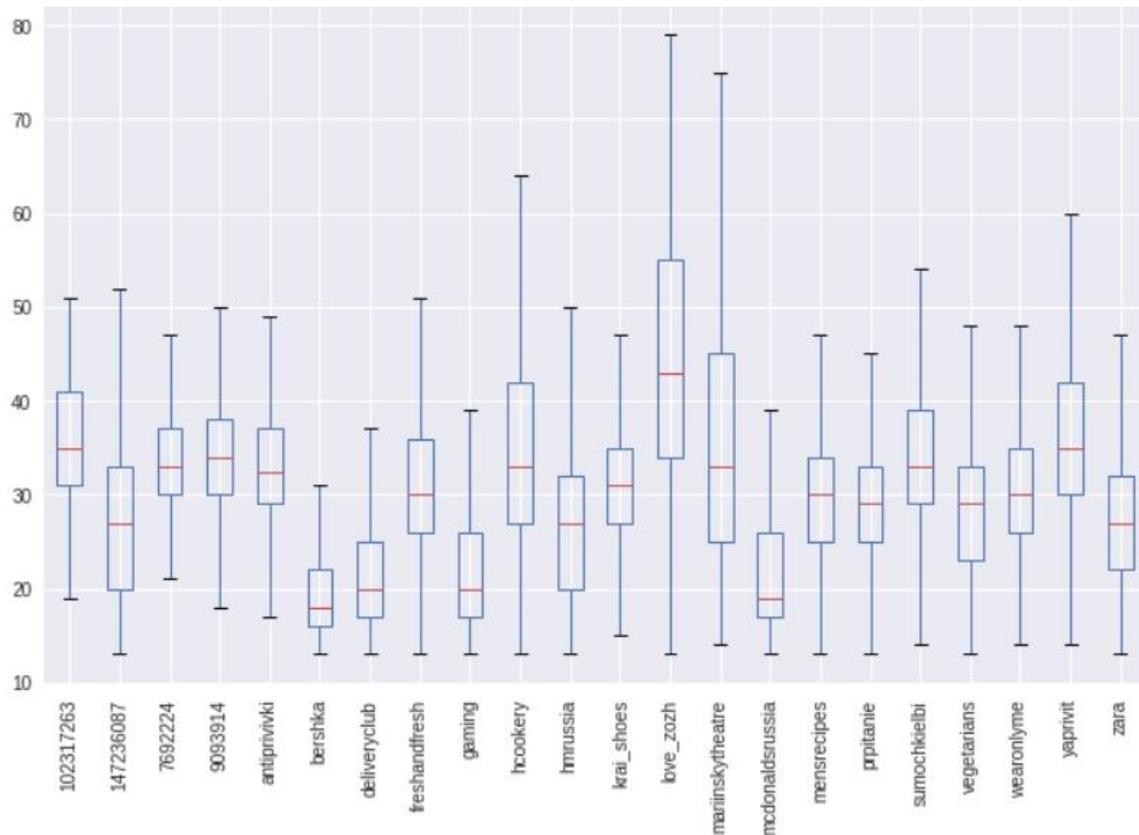
Combinations of subscriptions (several groups, subscriptions to which are often found together in different profiles) were identified using topic modelling with Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA). The optimal quality of the model, based on the measure of topic convergence, was obtained with 20 themes. For data analysis, the libraries `pandas`, `gensim`, `pyLDAvis` were used. To reduce the effect of popular subscriptions, when interpreting the selected 20 topics, the parameter  $\lambda = 0.7$  was used.

## 6. Findings

Analysis of user demography showed that our sample covers a fairly extensive age range from 14 years old (the minimum age for registration on the VK social network) to people over 75 years old (Fig.01). The core of the majority of the groups (17 of 22) adheres to the age of the most economically active population (25-35 years). Nevertheless, due to our sampling of groups devoted to different categories of daily consumption and contrasting preferences, we were able to include in the analysis both young people and elder consumers.

The graph of topic distance and size identified by the LDA algorithm is shown in Fig.02. In this topic space, four group themes were obtained (they are even highlighted graphically and are separated

from all others at the intersection of the third and fourth quarter), which on the one hand contained consumer indicators, and on the other hand, gave us individual psychological content. These include consumption of vaccinations, mass-market clothing, designer men's handmade products and leisure activities related to intellectual consumption.



**Figure 01.** Distribution of subscribers groups by age.

According to the consumption of vaccines and the manifestation of interest in them, we can assume with high precision the passion for yoga and the preference for gold jewellery, but specific to this group will be the installation on proper nutrition and cooking in a slow cooker, interest in Eastern culture and natural Chinese teas, work and life preponderance Balance in the direction of workaholism, appeal to the advice of lawyers. A large share of preferences is given to sports analytics, rates and investments in this area and has a pronounced gender tinge (mostly men). For this group, there is even a characteristic musical singer (Lisitsyn), performing music in the pop genre. Geographically, Izhevsk and Moscow became specific for this group.

The group that consumes clothes from the mass market (Zara, H&M), is characterized by a set of groups with a wide audience, so the specifics of this group are involved in large, de-individualized communities. A bright representative of a transitive society of the 21st century, reflecting its individuality through mass character. Mostly, this group consists of girls whose interest is the receipt of goods as a gift or for free. The circle of interests is outlined by gold ornaments, hair care, things, possible flights, goods for children, as well as the zoo. In particular, there are a number of more male hobbies related to

construction, equipment, and sports forecasts. But the common thing for them is the thirst for receiving goods for free.

Close to this in the thematic space we can see completely male group. They differ in the active consumption of handicrafts, leather goods, branded items and loyalty to Raiffeisenbank. But for a group with such a fairly specific consumption, there are also quite popular for that gender group hobbies: construction, apartment/ cottage interiors, blogs of successful entrepreneurs. As a leisure, they preferred movies and view interesting places in the city. Geographically they placed in the largest cities of Russia - Moscow and St. Petersburg. Also, for this group were found the specific professional communities of photographers for searching models, but this rather only underlines the gender component of this group and presumably reflects their objectivizing attitude towards women.

The last group we singled out touched a different stratum of people who could be attributed to the modern aristocracy, concentrated in the intellectual leisure sphere. On the one hand, this group is characterized by a number of theatres and museums (the Bolshoi Theatre, the Pushkin Museum, the Hermitage, the Boris Eifman Ballet Theatre), online news publications (TASS, Lenta.ru, Vedomosti, Ria Novosti, Russia today, RBK), but also television, radio channels and shows (STS, Radio Energy, Europe Plus, Evening Urgant show) and internet portals of glossy publications (woman.ru, cosmopolitan, championship.com).

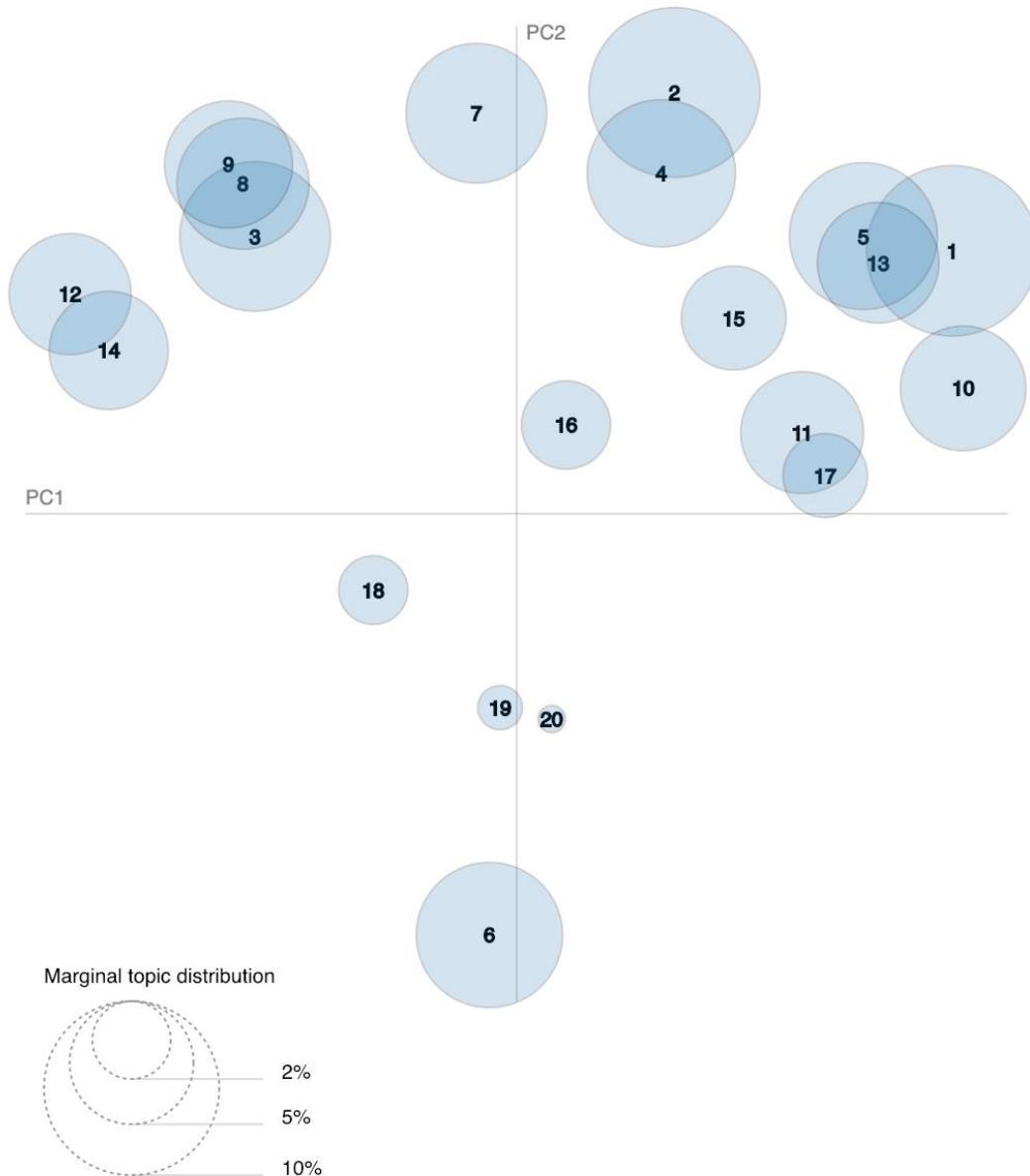
Also, we obtained thematic groups, consumer indicators for which were dictated by the preferences of the community of social network.

Pepsi, cigarettes and Playstation preferences are typical for young gamers who are fond of the computer industry, memes, jokes, English lessons, art and visual creativity. KFC, Apple and computer games are already characteristic of another community, which is already closer to Geek-culture: science and technology, modern technologies, comics, as well as humour, memes and pictures with deep thoughts.

The third type of groups we receive is characterized by the homogeneity of interests directed by the leading activity. For example, male car enthusiasts who are interested in repairs, melee weapons and workouts; fashion girls who are on the one hand addicted to horoscopes, psychology of relationships and fashion trends, and on the other hand, are interested in fiction, learning English and cooking. A meaningfully close group is characteristic of young mothers, reflecting ideas about women's responsibilities formed in the patriarchal discourse: how to be a feminine happy good mom and mistress (recipes, decor, creativity, women's secrets for self-care and for the apartment). But modern society has left its mark on such a fairly traditional group and manifested itself in a passion for self-development, learning the basics of doing business, traveling and developing horizons. Although the topic of handicrafts, knitting, sewing and caring for the garden attracts no fewer young mothers. People who pay special attention to proper nutrition are usually closely associated with vegetarianism, traditional alternative medicine, mantras, psychology, yoga, and recommendations related to the lunar calendar. The triumph of consumer subcultures became girls, who have a set of typical female preferences, but consumption of goods from Aliexpress's broad Chinese online platform has become the core.

It is worth noting that memes and humour are the most common way of communication and in one way or another we encountered it in each group, but characteristically, each group chooses its own

sources of humour, which has specifics not only by gender and material well-being, but also for a number of hobbies and hobbies.



**Figure 02.** Intertopic distance map (dimensions reduced with multidimensional scaling)

## 7. Conclusion

In a transitive society, such a plastic and changeable construct as a “subculture” is almost imperceptible. There is a danger to study either already “dead communities” or not to see a nascent subcultural community behind the nominal group. Therefore, the study of the real behavior of such dynamic communities in social networks is one of the most productive tools for studying.

Contrary to previous theories, subcultures are not an attribute of youth groups only. The blurring of the boundaries of both the subcultural communities and their functions for society, as well as the nature of identity in modern conditions, led to an increase in the average age of the participants in the subculture.

The gender group (especially males) has a strong differentiation in terms of material well-being. In further research we plan to develop a cross-cultural design for this study to differentiate personal determinants from historical context and cultural features.

## Acknowledgments

This article is prepared with the support of Russian Foundation for Basic Research (RFBR) №17-06-00980 “The historical and political factors of collective memory and identity of Russian society transformation”.

## References

- Arif, E.H.M. (2019). Potreblenie v srede molodyh aktivistov. *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya: Ekonomicheskie i socialnye peremeny*, 1, 66-83. [in Rus.]
- Cronin, J. M., McCarthy, M. B., & Collins, A. M. (2014). Covert distinction: how hipsters practice food-based resistance strategies in the production of identity. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 17(1), 2–28.
- Folomeeva, T.V. (2012). Consumer loyalty as a factor in consumer choice. *International Journal of Psychology*, 47, 178-178.
- Grishina, N.V., & Kostromina, S.N. (2017). Psihologiya lichnosti: pereosmyslenie tradicionnyh podhodov v kontekste vyzovov sovremennosti. *Psihologicheskie issledovaniya*, 10(52), 1. [in Rus.]
- Guselceva, M.S. (2016). Teoretiko-metodologicheskie osnovy garmonizacii processov socializacii, individualizacii i identichnosti lichnosti v usloviyah tranzitivnogo obshchestva. *Psihologicheskie issledovaniya*, 9(50), 6. [in Rus.]
- Kozinets, R. V. (2001). Utopian Enterprise: Articulating the Meanings of Star Trek’s Culture of Consumption. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 28(1), 67–88.
- Leigh, T. W., Peters, C., & Shelton, J. (2006). The Consumer Quest for Authenticity: The Multiplicity of Meanings Within the MG Subculture of Consumption. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(4), 481–493.
- Litvina D. A. (2019). Chto znachit byt nastoyashchim: molodezhnye kulturny v poiskah autentichnosti. *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya: Ekonomicheskie i socialnye peremeny*, 1, 324-341. [in Rus.]
- Martsinkovskaya, T.D. (2013). Subkultura v tranzitivnom obshchestve. *Voprosy psihologii*, 4, 57–69. [in Rus.]
- Martsinkovskaya, T.D. (2017). Psihologiya povsednevnosti: oksyumoron ili novyj trend psihologii. *Psihologicheskie issledovaniya*, 10(56), 1. [in Rus.]
- Novak, M.V. (2016). Prazdnye subkultury obshchestva potrebleniya. *Nauka. Iskusstvo. Kultura*, 3, 11. [in Rus.]
- Schiele, K., & Venkatesh, A. (2016). Regaining control through reclamation: how consumption subcultures preserve meaning and group identity after commodification. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 19(5), 427–450.
- Schouten, J. W., & McAlexander, J.H. (1995). Subcultures of Consumption: An Ethnography of the New Bikers. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22(1), 43-61.
- Ulusoy, E., & Schembri, S. (2018). Subculture as learning context: subcultural music consumption as language, channel and journey. *Consumption, Markets & Culture*, 21(3), 239–254.
- Vinokurov, F.N. (2012). Stabilnost potrebitelskogo povedeniya i loylnost brendu. *Rossijskij nauchnyj zhurnal*, 5(30), 195-203. [in Rus.]
- Wheaton, B. (2000). “Just Do It”: Consumption, Commitment, and Identity in the Windsurfing Subculture. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 17(3), 254–274.