

A Sociological Study of the Effects of Lifestyle on Social Identity and its Effective Factors

Reza Esmaeili¹
Alireza Abedinzadeh^{*2}

Received 27 December 2015; Accepted 25 April 2016

Abstract:

The line between lifestyle and social identity in sociology is based on the distinction between traditional and modern society. In traditional societies lifestyle and social identity are based on their related features. However, in this regard, in terms of time precedence, modern societies mainly offer two different answers, each based on different theoretical approaches. The first and the older approach focuses on productive activities and one's place in the social identity constructive system; and the second which is the newer approach, considers one's consumption behavior as the basis for social identity. The first approach is related to the concept of social class and the second approach is summed up in the concept of lifestyle. Methodology of the present research is based on Delphi technique focused on the urban middle -class youth who are 15 to 29 years old and the research partners are selected from university professors. The present study uses three basic indices from the available indicators and they have been changed to be applicable for this analysis. The aim of this study is to provide new criteria based on novel social groupings considering recent decade lifestyle that indicates the boundaries of identity.

Keywords: Lifestyle, Late modernity, Consumption, Social identity.

1. Department of Sociology, Dehaghan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan, Iran

2.*Department of Sociology, Dehaghan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Dehaghan, Iran, r156_156@yahoo.com (Corresponding author)

1. Introduction

Lifestyle is defined as a set of behaviors of an individual that not only satisfy his/her current needs but these behaviors represent one's personal identity to others.

Lifestyle is a term that was not so applicable in traditional culture because it is selected from a large number of possibilities. Speaking of a plurality of selections should neither lead to the assumption that all options are open to all people nor that all the decisions regarding their choices are made with full knowledge of all the facilities available to them. Whether in the field of work and physical activity or in the field of consumption and nutrition there are different lifestyle choices in the life of all groups that have been released from the shackles of traditional customs.

As Bourdieu says (Giddens, 2004, p.121), it is natural that differences in lifestyle between groups are in fact the preliminary structural forms of social groupings.

In the present study the youth are considered as effective consumers who have different roles. A consumer is sometimes considered as a selector who intends to seek profit from his activities. While the consumers are regarded as the driving force of consumption and also rational actors and they are the best judges of their own interests, other consumer roles are as follows:

Consumer as a communicator (by using consumption symbols) in various ways such as conspicuous consumptions or leisure demonstrations; consumer as a prospector, and a consumer who seeks an identity and position.

Here we emphasize that, contrary to economists, this research with a sociological approach considers the young position as a consumer who doesn't act merely according to his/her profitability but "a young consumer" is an individual who needs to be checked according to his/her Interaction with other youth and community members. So the rationality of the consumer is only a variable not a preconception and according to Jean Baudrillard, people doesn't consume just because they need (Saeidi, 2004, p.64). So in the sphere of consumption, social dynamics of the consumption as conformity, compliance and competition patterns are defined. Consumption sociology "as opposed to" psychology is less concerned with deep motivations of an individual but rather seeks to enable patterns of conformity, compliance and competition in the young consumers that make the active patterns under the influence of their peer groups. As previously mentioned, today we are surrounded by extraordinary consumption and frequency of services, objects and material goods. These cases create a basic jump in human ecology.

According to Jean Baudrillard human is no more surrounded by other human but now the human is surrounded by the objects. These cases create a basic jump in

human ecology. In such circumstances, a young consumer behaves very creatively, since young people in spite of other age and gender groups including females don't deal passively or uncritically with such a society (Saeidi, 2004, p.65). Youth on the market change the meaning of the purchased goods and create new lifestyles in mass market. This comes in the form of a kind of creative work that produces new categories in the consumer market. They impose their own special aesthetic on the consumer market that takes place through colors and specific goods. This can be discerned through their clothing purchase, food consumption, leisure (time consuming) and etc.

2. Problem statement

Instead of entering the world of post-modern the world is moving towards an era in which the consequences of modernity are more and more global and instituted (Giddens, 2004, p.30). And no doubt that today's modern world extensively extends beyond the individual activities environment and one neither can stay immune from the changes caused by the spread of modernity nor can select otherwise. Even modernity, affected the people who live in the most traditional settlements outside the "developed" world. In recent decade, social structures that make sense in the context of identity such as social classes (production system) are discarded (Chavoshian, 2003, p.5). Orientation of social theories in recent decades towards increased recognition of the importance of lifestyle (consumption domain) shapes the personal and social identity and is proposed as a subject for social research and theory. In the recent decade the people of a community are not able to have a meaningful and sustainable communication among themselves without lifestyle and social identity, namely without a credible institutional framework which reveals the similarities and differences. Modern objects presentation displays a series of objects that complement each other and shows the right of choice and creates a society that is full of drama and paintings, where the consumer feels that everything wanted is produced. The key feature of this society must be sought in inevitable increasing degree of choice in the manufacturing and supplying the goods. Focus on the consumer as a social being caused the consumption of goods in the process of social interaction. In this way, the class society changes into a mass society; a society in which the self is changed into commodity self and the individual has become harmonized and matched up with the goods. Social Theories in their recent approaches pay more attention to the ways through them the language of forms and styles status is introduced, because now, following Max Weber, there is a traditional distinction between class and dignity that

reveals the focus on the social differences in consumption ways rather than production methods (Krayb, 2004, p.226). Contemporary sociology orientation moves towards accepting the increasing importance of consumption and lifestyle activities in shaping the personal and collective identity (Giddens, 2004, p. 119). New forms of consumer-based social identities are shaped by the characteristics that now constitute the fundamental elements of the phenomena related to the lifestyle. These properties are new forms of social identity which caused some order in lifestyles.

3. The theoretical framework

A consumption patterned method of lifestyle includes understanding and valuing the products in terms of material culture that makes it possible to establish identity criteria in time and place contexts. Lifestyle products focuses primarily on symbolic meanings, namely what lies behind the clear identity of these products and lifestyle is a term that is not so applicable in traditional culture because it is selected from a large number of possibilities. This approach is a way that leads to understanding the modernization of lifestyles and their disagreements with former formations and these symbolic meanings are adopted cases that are continually reinvented (Giddens, 2004, p.120).

The reason for the symbolic content of lifestyle includes industrialization that caused untold complexity and differentiation of the world's goods. And not only the number of objects extremely increased but also how to access, supply, display and introduce them are considered some services that all are like some goods that are sold in the market. Lifestyles are mostly in the form of tangible things that change them into the symbolic forms that are flexible with different meanings (Chavoshian, 2003, p. 2). All material possessions bear social meanings so a major part of cultural analysis should be done about using these goods as a media and lifestyle of personal consumption of goods is the visible part of the culture. These ways of consumption are used in the hierarchical arrangement that result in the full spectrum of distinction, as much as the human mind is able to consider (Chavoshian, 2003, p.3).

Many researchers in this field consider Bourdieu's book entitled *Distinction* as scholars Bible. A few texts can be found in this area that has not reviewed his opinions. Bourdieu analyzes the lifestyle choices and says that its importance lies in that in recent decade the structural and social distinctions of modernization are increasingly expressed via cultural capitals. All of the consumption procedures including the extraction and manipulation should be considered as a demonstration of the mastery of a communication symbol. And it must also be understood as an

aesthetic orientation which "is the most demanding title that (always implicitly) imposes the world of culture" (Bourdieu, 1984). We can see that the style of using the products, especially those goods which are considered privileged, constitute one of the key signs of the identity and is also considered as an ideal weapon for differentiation strategies (Bourdieu, 1984). Bourdieu in the second main argument in his distinction book provides a social critique of tastes and specifies that taste in its first and foremost form means reluctance towards the tastes of others.

Since the acts and cultural practices as playing golf or football visit a museum or exhibition cars, listening to jazz or watch a comedy series and things like that not only takes their social meaning, and the ability to make a difference and social distance from their inherent properties but earn them from their favorite cultural positions. Hence revealing the social logic of consumption is not established via a direct link between the procedure and special operations but through structural accordance between two sets of relationships, including the lifestyle and social status of different groups (Mirdamadi, 2005. p.339). Social and cultural transformations in recent decade's modernity are the main theme from Giddens point of view. Like, Bourdieu, Giddens deals with the issue of rivalry or competition between macro and micro sociological perspective that emphasizes functionality on the structure. In the text post-traditional arrangement itself changed into a project of "self-reflection (Giddens, 2002, p. 32). A reflection of the lifestyles means that every lifestyle has necessarily an indefinite meaning in its context. And so the ambiguity of the meaning of lifestyle negates the possibility of explaining the full meaning of structural determinants. Reflectance shows that the meanings of lifestyle activities are not determined by larger forces but during the process of practical business of distinct worlds, the meanings of the methods of using symbolic materials of mass consumption, are transformed into tangible objects and actions which are metaphors for their own. Reflectance refers to the use the information in relation to the conditions of activity as a tool to adjust and redefine the meaning and nature of the rule based behavior (Giddens, 2002, p.86)

So according to Giddens, the transformation of lifestyles and modernity structural changes bind to each other due to caller reflectivity. Because of the openness of social life today, the plurality of action settings and the number of more powerful references, lifestyle adoption for creating personal identity and taking daily activities are increasingly important (Giddens, 2002, p.88). For a deep understanding of this issue, it should be noted that according to Giddens personal identity is a modern program that people perceive in terms of their understanding of the methods of self-expression, identity and their personal biography. According to Giddens lifestyles are more

important than leisure activities programs, and in fact Giddens believes that lifestyle is corrupted due to consumerism. However, the market has become an ideological idea in the neo-liberal policies apparently due to the freedom of choices and thus individualism is promoted. Giddens argues that manipulation and modifying one's own through a variety of media narratives as well as marketing strategies with emphasis on the lifestyle is done at the expense of personal meanings (Giddens, 2002, p. 18).

Giddens opinions provide an appropriate conclusion for our theoretical ideas due to his notion about social changes. Lifestyles are considered from important signs of changing relations of individuality and community. Based on the above discussion, the outlines of the presented approaches in this study can be formulated as follows:

1 - To provide certain forms of identity in modernization processes and deploy them in certain areas of social action, such as: taste, lifestyle and fashion.

2- The increasing importance of social action areas in order to clarify and describe social life while other distinctive structural forms have become less important.

3 - The growing importance of lifestyle and identity by relying on consumption domain.

4- Personal identity is not something that is delegated as a result of group memberships or continuity of individual social practices, but the individual must constantly promote it and to protect and to support its own activities in a reflective way.

Finally, we can conclude that being aware of the importance of normative and symbolic meanings as a function of cultural changes in recent decades is modernity.

4. Methodology

4.1. Statistical population

Our sample includes middle class urban youth aged 15 to 29 years (large cities) as the unit of analysis.

4.2. Research methodology

Qualitative research method and the Delphi method are used. In Delphi method, all people have not the chance to participate in the study as responders and a sampling are not needed. This aspect distinguishes this method from conventional methods such as measurement. In this method, depending on the subject that can be politics, education or the environment, the expert opinions are asked. People who have enough knowledge about the issue and their views as experts are acceptable to others. So the contributors to this study include 12 university professors.

4.3. Execution method

Delphi method seeks the expert opinions. Therefore, before beginning work on the subject, experts are identified. These people are also called the Delphi domain members. Delphi method is fully performed as follows:

A) Research partners are selected and they are asked to fill a questionnaire depending on the subject and to offer their views, suggestions, recommendations or prediction.

B) After collecting the first round of questionnaires, research partners receive first round feedback such as all partners answers median and second round of responses begins to determine the severity of the compatibility or incompatibility with an average of the group response.

C) Once more feedback is given to the participants in terms of group response median as well as to determine why some participants do not agree with the median of the responses.

D) It is necessary to explain that part (b) can be repeated. Although, after these two steps a convergence of opinion won't develop.

The researcher himself links people with each other. He has a duty to summarize the information in each round and to present them to each one of the partners and to receive answers.

5. Concepts and variables

5.1. Lifestyle

Lifestyle means relatively consistent set of behaviors and actions of a certain person in the course of his/her life and it includes a series of habits and orientations, and thus it reveals a kind of unity. In addition to its importance in terms of continued existence of security it provides a link between sub choices in a more or less regular pattern.

5.2. Social identity

Social identity is person's perception of self in relation to others and it is formed based on membership in different social classes and groups. Individual's identity depends on others' perception and others' identification confirms the identity, in the original sense of identity, similarity and distinction are absolutely observed.

All human identities, even individual identity are manifested in selfhood and they are formed based on how to communicate with others and their social lifetime experiences and they are related to the sense and meaning and the result of agreement or disagreement is delegated to all participants. In addition, one's social identity is

never come to its end and it is constantly subject to change and revision (Jenkins, 1381: 45).

5.3. Personal identity

"Self" is a way that a person perceives reflectively and in terms of his/her formal biography. Personal identity emphasizes on the differences and social identity focuses on similarities (Giddens, 2004, p. 326).

5.4. Consumption

The new economy favors social world in which people are assessed allegedly based on their production capacity, and they also will be valued in terms of their consumption capacity. And the new economy negates ascetic ethics of production and stockpiling in favor of hedonistic consumption ethics, consumption is the most essential element of modern social world and is dependent on economic factors (Bourdieu, 1984).

5.5. Late modernity

Modernization is some kind of order that follows a traditional society, but not so much order in which a sense of security and certainty of habits and traditions are giving way to ensure the rational knowledge.(Giddens, 2004). Late modernity at the current stage is revealed through novel social institutions and globalization that determine its major features (Giddens, 2002).

6. Findings

Since, by definition, lifestyle is a set of behaviors, it seems that there are many instances in this regard. But there are constraints to the behaviors that are considered lifestyle indices which in turn limit these cases. In addition, the plurality of indicators that are offered for lifestyle makes it difficult to categorize them. Sobel argued that lifestyle indicators should be expressive and recognizable in the community (Fazeli, 2005, p. 125). Such a feature is not necessary for the behaviors that are considered lifestyle indices. Lifestyle Literature shows that lifestyle factors considered by the investigators often do not have such a property. Even Mantez (Fazeli, 2005) distinguishes three types of human needs:

1- Basic needs that are necessary for human survival

2- Routine needs that shapes human personality

3- Human luxury needs which satisfy his basic needs raise lifestyle questions Meeting such needs is realized in everyday life without any expressive and differentiable modes. This argument also has another explanation. To the extent that there are more accessible facilities in the community, the use of the goods and more

economic activities are considered as habitual or routine modes and by improving the rate of people choices, the potential power for shaping the lifestyles is enhanced.

Another point for lifestyle indicators is that these behaviors show the actor's choice power more than any other behaviors. Most such behaviors can be outside the domain of one's material power. For example, it is not possible to measure individuals' lifestyle in terms of buying expensive cars. Lifestyle behaviors should be measured on the basis of the behaviors that depend less on individuals' material power or its impact should be to the extent that most members of the community are able to pay it. We can say firmly that the choice is a precondition for lifestyle realization, and since no culture completely denies the right of choice but impose some limitation on choices so some issues are raised that are beyond the realm of an individual. And to test the lifestyle according to the unit of analysis these points should be noted.

In this study lifestyle is evaluated from different perspectives and especially from behavioral point of view that plays an active role due to a set of choices as symbols in the process of shaping identity. Since revealing the lifestyle differences or similarities among different groups or classes alone will have little sociological value so lifestyle should not be studied in the context of behaviors that their class specifications are clear. And secondly, to reveal the class specification is worthwhile provided that this product specification is something beyond the differences of distinct group access to goods or facilities. So the first question is mentioned that some of the variables affecting the individual or group undoubtedly are effective in realization the individuals options. But because the lifestyle, tastes and choices of the individuals are being considered and we know that lifestyle is a result of an individual action toward his /her life so in this regard some questions are raised.

In this section, basic indicators along with examples of the presented questions and contributors views are observed.

6.1. Cultural consumption indicator

For two reasons lifestyle factors are more derived from the realm of cultural consumption. The first reason is that cost of cultural consumption is often lower than other types of activities and the power of individual choice in this field is high. In addition, the taste that is one of the constructive elements of lifestyle occurs more than anything else in the patterns of cultural consumption and activities. Secondly, Bourdieu's view that the upper classes with the use of higher culture distinct themselves from other classes, has caused many scholars review his theory. However, the tastes of people in cultural consumption, along with

leisure activities and consumption patterns are from the main indicators used in studies of lifestyle (Fazeli, 2005, p.127).

Table 1. Prioritization of cultural goods in the urban middle-class youth lifestyle

In your opinion which one of the following items of cultural consumption is effective in order of priority in determining the urban middle-class youth lifestyle?											Question 1
visiting the museum	going to the theatre	Participation in art activities	Listening to the radio	Reading magazines	Reading books	cinema	Reading newspapers	Listening to the music	Other video media(satellite and	Watching television	options
11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

6.2. Leisure activities indicator

The second category of lifestyle indicators includes activities that people do in their spare time. To adopt leisure activities in leisure time is a sign of an individual cultural values and taste. It is natural that sometimes people's cultural consumption is a part of his/her leisure activity, but all leisure activities are not considered cultural consumption. Like the concept of cultural consumption, here also every leisure activity can be of different sizes and shapes. Thus, taking into account the different levels of leisure activities and forms it can be discerned what types of lifestyle factors we face.

Table 2. Leisure activities Priority in the urban middle-class youth lifestyle

In your opinion which one of the following items of leisure activities is effective in order of priority in determining the urban middle-class youth lifestyle??											Question 2
travelling	Visiting the exhibitions	participation in NGO voluntary activities	Participation in political activities	Watching sporting events	Religious activities	Sports and games	Lie off	Outdoor Leisure	Meeting friends	options	
10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1		priorities

Table3. Spaces priorities in urban middle class youth lifestyle

In your opinion, which of the following areas in order of priority have more desirability and effectiveness in determining urban middle-class youth lifestyle?										Question 3
Cultural center	Stadium	hotel	Restaurant	Friendly parties	home	Coffee shop	park	street	street	
9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1		priorities

6.3. Scattered indicators:

There is an extensive literature devoted to the field of cultural consumption and leisure activities as indicators of lifestyle, but collectively they sometimes refer to other activities that cannot be mentioned here under a unit heading. Some of them are as follows:

1- Body management: Chavoshian refers to three indices of which the behaviors related to body management are interesting (Chavoshian, 2003).

2- Purchase patterns: Buying practices and the kind of purchased products can be as an indicator of lifestyle. Of course, this indicator is effective for goods that commonly are used and also are achievable for the bulk of society.

The way of home decoration, the method of words pronunciation and speaking, people's travelling destination during their holidays, owning pets, and the habit of drinking alcohol and smoking are also known as lifestyle factors (Fazeli, 2005, p. 129).

However, the selection of the behaviors that are considered lifestyle criteria must be done according to the social context. With the advent of social and cultural change at the community also the level of these indices will be altered.

Perhaps participation of men in housework in today's Iranian society is a lifestyle feature of some men and families. But it is likely that in a few decades it will become a custom of the public life and it cannot be considered as a good indicator for lifestyle.

Such considerations make it impossible that we offer a set of stable indicators for lifestyle studies. Also the researcher purpose for analyzing lifestyles and the rate of dominating community structural constraints on people and their activities effect on indicator selection.

Table 4. Expense priority of urban middle-class youth lifestyle

In your opinion, which of the following expense areas in order of priority are effective in determining urban middle-class youth lifestyle?					Question 4
transportation	Home decoration	food	clothing	Personal appearance	options
5	4	3	2	1	

Table 5: purchase priority feature in the urban middle-class youth lifestyle

In your opinion, which of the following purchase features in order of priority are effective in determining urban middle-class youth lifestyle?								question 5
durability	genus	brand	convenience	color	price	beauty	fashion	options
8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	

Table 6: body related cases priorities in urban middle-class youth lifestyle

In your opinion, which of the following body related cases in order of priority are effective in determining urban middle-class youth lifestyle?						Question 6
Cosmetic surgery	colored contact lenses	Sports (boys fitness)	Diet for weight loss (girls)	Face make up	Hair makeup	options
6	5	4	3	2	1	

7. Discussion and conclusions

Reviewing the findings shows that in recent decades the process of lifestyle and social and personal identity move towards structural foundations and transform into reflective processes. Of course it doesn't mean that gaining identity via showing taste choices is a new case but this case is always done traditionally and only a small elite group is capable of recognizing and using signs and symbols.

In the last decade bragged with new modes of clothing, a variety of other choices including type of communications and behaviors, presence in a variety of public and private places, leisure activities and various cultural purposes and some issues related

to the body which enable one to show a dignified image of self, are clearly open to everyone.

The findings of this study suggest that cultural productions are the most practical expenditures of the studied youth and the most cultural products are used in their spare time but they do not fill all their leisure times and many cultural productions is not necessarily used in their leisure time. However, the findings also show that the reviewed cultural indicators are the first and most important forms of youth consumptions .However, the concept of lifestyle familiarizes the researchers with the importance of the culture more than ever. In the following, as we mentioned earlier, we are moving towards a society that is beyond sustainable dignified groups and it produces countless signs and symptoms that do not have definite and absolute referents.

The youth as social groups involved in a contest for controlling certain social fields and they benefit from their accumulated economic and cultural capital to improve their favorite symbolic system to control these fields. Because in this social sphere, people are not only judged based on their production but also they are judged based on their capacity and consumption power, and also their lifestyles (Bourdieu, 1984). Certainly communities themselves are the producers of the concept of youth as a particular social group and through explicit (legal) and implicit (cultural) norms, they determine youth position in the society. The official transition into adulthood means to gain the full citizenship rights that are realized in youth times, however from the sociological point of view in addition to the norms, social conditions and economic decision-making, education, and welfare and so on this process is effective and efficient.

The findings show that nowadays instead of following merely the predetermined lifestyles in social system the youth themselves somewhat determine their own choices and positions. Of course, family as a social source still retains its importance in which young people grow up. But lifestyle is a certain aspect of people's experiences that its advantage lies in giving people a right of choice, creativity, satisfaction and pleasure that in itself creates more fun and joy.

Lifestyle includes a comprehensive form of activities that its elements in addition to have intellectual and social aspects also possess a physical nature. In this sense the above definition negates the activities that are done with an instrumental attitude or forcibly or imposed from outside and the activities that are not done astronomically. Essentially these kinds of activities limit a person's identity formation. The resulted priorities from research indicators show that the information and electronic

communications in the past decades linked the youth lifestyles with the new methods of digital life and change the especial youth cultures into a global culture. Youth culture means one culture system that attracts all of those who are under 30 years in all social classes. In other words, special culture of the youth includes youth groups who are characterized by their beliefs, values and norms versus the dominant culture or the established social order. This particular culture can be observed in youth actions, choices and lifestyles and change the especial youth cultures into a global culture. The youth culture means one culture system that attracts all persons less than 30 years in all social classes.

In other words, special culture of the youth includes youth groups who are characterized by their beliefs, values and norms versus the dominant culture or the established social order. This particular culture can be observed in youth actions, choices and lifestyles.

References

1. Abazari, J. and Chavoshian, H. (2003). From social class to lifestyle. *Social Science Journal*.
2. Bakak, R. (2003). *Consumption* (1st ed). Tehran: Shirazeh Publication.
3. Castells, M. (2000). *Information age: social networking development* (2nd ed.). Tehran: New Design.
4. Fazeli, M. (2005). *Consumption and lifestyle*. Tehran; Sobh-e Sadegh Publication.
5. Giddens, A. (2002). *Consequences of modernity*(2nd ed.). Tehran: Publication Center.
6. Giddens, A. (2004). *Modernity and distinction (community and personal identity in the modern age)* (2nd ed.). Tehran: Ney Publication.
7. Jenkins, R. (2003). *Social identity* (1st ed.). Tehran: Shirazeh Publication.
8. Krayb, I. (2004). *Modern social theory*. Tehran: Aqa Publication.
9. Saeedi, A. (2004). The consumer society and youth. *Journal of Youth Studies* (5th ed.).