AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO MARKET SEGMENTATION: CONTRIBUTIONS OF QUALITATIVE VARIABLES IN CONSUMER/USER CLASSIFICATION

UN ENFOQUE ANTROPOLÓGICO A LA SEGMENTACIÓN DE MERCADOS: APORTES DE LAS VARIABLES CUALITATIVAS EN CLASIFICACIÓN DE CONSUMIDORES/USUARIOS

UMA ABORDAGEM ANTROPOLÓGICA DA SEGMENTAÇÃO DE MERCADO: CONTRIBUIÇÕES DAS VARIÁVEIS QUALITATIVAS NA CLASSIFICAÇÃO DO CONSUMIDORES/USUÁRIOS

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Abstract

This article analyzes concepts from leading authors in the anthropology of consumption to establish a deeper understanding of consumer/user segmentation. To achieve this, a literature review was conducted using a hermeneutic approach and a qualitative method to provide a panoramic view of the body of knowledge in the field of consumer/user classification. The selection of the bibliographic corpus was based on in-depth interviews with experts in consumption studies, aimed at identifying key literature on the subject. As a result, five anthropological authors were selected due to their contributions to understanding the behaviors of individuals related to consumption. Among the findings, it is noted that the segmentation variables commonly used in marketing remain highly relevant for audience classification. Still, it is also true that an anthropological perspective on this field contributes to understanding consumers beyond what defines them by their income, place of residence, age, gender identity, and other variables, bringing forth important anthropological concepts such as differentiation, representation, meanings, and symbolic burdens.

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza conceptos de autores referentes de la antropología del consumo con el fin de establecer una concepción más profunda de la segmentación de consumidores/usuarios. Para esto se elaboró una revisión bibliográfica, apelando a un enfoque hermenéutico y un método cualitativo, con la intención de plantear una visión panorámica del cuerpo de conocimientos en el campo de la clasificación de consumidores/usuarios. La selección del corpus bibliográfico se realizó a partir de entrevistas en profundidad a expertos sobre estudios del consumo, con la finalidad de identificar bibliografía clave del tema. De esta forma, se seleccionaron cinco autores de la antropología, debido a su aporte frente a las formas de comportamiento de las personas ligadas con el consumo. Entre los hallazgos se observa que las variables de segmentación comúnmente utilizadas en mercadeo, siguen teniendo gran vigencia y relevancia para la

clasificación de públicos, pero también es cierto que una mirada antropológica a este campo, contribuye a pensar en los consumidores más allá de lo que los define por sus ingresos, el lugar que habitan, su edad, el género con que se identifican, entre otras variables, emergiendo conceptos antropológicos de importancia como la diferenciación, la representación, los significados y las cargas simbólicas.

Palabras clave: antropología; consumo; economía de mercado; estudio de mercado; segmentación.

JEL: M210; M310; M37; D01; Z130.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os conceitos dos principais autores da antropologia do Consumo a fim de estabelecer uma compreensão mais profunda da segmentação de consumidores/usuários. Para isso, foi realizada uma revisão da literatura, utilizando uma abordagem hermenêutica e um método qualitativo, com a intenção de fornecer uma visão panorâmica do corpo de conhecimento no campo da classificação do consumidor/usuário. A seleção do corpus bibliográfico baseou-se em entrevistas em profundidade com especialistas em estudos de consumidores, com o objetivo de identificar a literatura principal sobre o assunto. Dessa forma, foram selecionados cinco autores antropológicos, devido à sua contribuição para as formas de comportamento das pessoas ligadas ao consumo. Entre os achados, observa-se que as variáveis de segmentação comumente utilizadas no marketing continuam tendo grande validade e relevância para a classificação dos públicos, mas também é verdade que um olhar antropológico sobre esse campo contribui para pensar o consumidor para além do que o define por sua renda, pelo local onde mora, por sua idade, pelo gênero com o qual se identifica, entre outras variáveis, emergindo conceitos antropológicos de importância como diferenciação, representação, significados e cargas simbólicas.

Palavras-chave: antropologia; consumo; economia de mercado; pesquisa de mercado; segmentação.

JEL: M210; M310; M37; D01; Z130.

222

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

Introduction

Public segmentation exercises have gained relevance in recent times, as since the 1950s, capitalism entered an era based on segmentation. For companies whose products and services reach large portions of the population, it is necessary to group the vast universe of their audience into segments in order to focus their offerings, communication actions, customer service models, and other marketing aspects.

Oliveira and Martins (2008) state that the concept of market segmentation was introduced by Smith in 1956, who defined it as the task of conceiving a heterogeneous market as a set of homogeneous markets, addressing the preferences of different market segments. In this way, the practical and creative challenge for organizations lies in identifying which variables to prioritize in order to obtain homogeneous groups among themselves and heterogeneous ones relative to others, for the strategic direction of marketing actions.

After reviewing the literature on segmentation exercises, it is observed that many of the texts related to this topic do not focus on the process itself or the key variables determined to define a specific segment, but rather limit themselves to defining a population of interest, such as the population of a geographic area, workers from a certain industry, students from a particular field of study, among others; in order to understand how these audiences are affected by the consumption of a product or service, how the labor market of a specific segment operates, or other research questions (Daellenbach et al., 2018; De Moraes et al., 2016; Lemma, 2022; Manzanares et al., 2022; Márquez et al., 2020; Pardo et al., 2013; Paz, 2013; Pedreño, 2022; Pérez & Morales, 2017; Souza et al., 2021).

Additionally, from this review, it is evident that segmentation is performed to identify elements that a group of people may have in common and establish homogeneous characteristics within a large, seemingly heterogeneous mass. This allows marketing actions to be more effective by targeting people who are genuinely interested in a specific offering, message, or action implemented by a company aimed at its audience. In this regard, Schiffman and Lazar (2010) state that:

The market segmentation process and the search for target consumers consist of identifying segments within a given market or population, evaluating the marketing potential of each segment, choosing the segments to target, and creating a marketing mix (i.e., product, price, place, and promotion) for each selected target segment. Consumers can be segmented based on different factors such as demographic indicators, lifestyles (including hobbies), and usage habits associated with a product, or other factors (p. 52).

Regardless of the variables defined for classifying individuals, market segments must have particular characteristics and purposes: first, the variables need to be measurable in size; second, the segments must be large enough to be of interest to companies; third, the characteristics of the segments must be homogeneous; fourth, the segments need to be differentiable from others; and fifth, the segments must be operable, meaning that marketing strategies can be designed for them (Maričić & Đorđević, 2015).

According to Dolnicar et al. (2018), only when it has been decided which group of consumers/users the organization's offering will target and how it will be presented to this audience to appear attractive, does work begin on a tactical marketing plan. According to these authors, age, gender identity, country of birth, or stage of the family life cycle can be configured as segmentation criteria based on a single characteristic. Furthermore, this exercise can also be done by grouping a broader set of factors, such as the benefits of purchasing a specific good, shared activities or values, and spending patterns.

Similarly, common segmentation practices resort to the use of statistical analysis tools with methods such as multivariate:

[…] regression and multiple correlation, multiple discriminant analysis, principal component analysis, common factor analysis, multivariate analysis of variance and covariance, canonical correlation, multidimensional analysis, and cluster analysis (Tanda et al., 2011, p. 44).

These statistical techniques aim to classify, in the case of market segmentation, individuals who share certain traits into groups that are heterogeneous enough to differentiate them as population segments.

224

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

At the same time, the large amount of data that companies possess about their customers, even those associated with their interactions on digital platforms, could lead to new forms of segmentation (Fresneda et al., 2022), as traditional methods of public classification do not take into account the networked nature of the interactive relationships developed between brands and their customers in virtual environments (Wang, 2022). Similarly, assuming that segmentation is a powerful tool to gain deeper insights into specific markets, studies such as those developed by Hassan et al. (2022) show that people exhibit differences in terms of attitudes, motivations, and product usage patterns, leading to classifications that can be distinguished by consumption behavior, rather than sociodemographic variables. This, according to these researchers, should encourage marketing specialists to develop innovative segmentation methods that help organizations discover new market opportunities.

As seen, a key challenge in segmentation is that human beings are complex and dynamic. While some population groups remain static over long periods, such as being within a certain age range, residing in a particular geographic area, or earning a certain income, other variables can experience faster changes, for example, when new trends are adopted. Likewise, another difficulty in segmentation lies in the fact that individuals are not defined by a single characteristic, such as age, gender, income level, buying behaviors, or any other classification variable. Someone can be passionate about fashion and shopping while simultaneously being calculative and careful with their spending, without this being necessarily exclusive. At the same time, they have a specific age, a set income, and belong to a particular geographic area. In this sense, it is evident that market segmentation should reflect a deep understanding of consumers, from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives (Vicente & Mediano, 2018).

Despite the above, organizations face significant challenges in identifying valuable qualitative variables that allow them to group their audiences, often limited to prior quantitative classifications. In other words, they rely on available data such as customer purchases (average ticket), number of visits to points of sale, or basic demographic classifications like gender, age, and income. To a lesser extent, classifications using qualitative variables, such as lifestyle, taste, rationality and emotionality in decisions, relationships with others, cultural influence, and attitudes toward the world, appear.

As segmentation, according to Tanda et al. (2011), should be carried out with "theoretical, conceptual, and practical considerations in mind, and should be based on logic by the importance of including only those variables that truly characterize the objects being grouped, and specifically relate to the objectives of the analysis" (p. 45), having a broader range of classification variables would open up the possibility for a more complete understanding of customers.

Vukasović (2020), when addressing the topic of segmentation, defines two groups of variables: descriptive variables—demographic, socioeconomic, psychographic, and usage occasion; and behavioral variables—desired benefits, desired usage, purchase patterns and loyalty, participation in market decisions, brand attitudes, and sensitivity to marketing mix elements. The first group of variables, which are generally easier to identify and collect, involves grouping people based on their age, gender, and income, among others. The second group focuses on the qualitative elements related to people's actions towards others and the market. Thus, the task of segmentation should be based on considering variables from both groups, and the author proposes first performing a classification based on behavioral characteristics, that is, qualitative variables, and then defining the segments using descriptive variables.

In this logic, Madeira et al. (2015) point out that people's behavior can be influenced by five individual factors: demographic, psychographic, motivations, knowledge, and attitudes. This establishes a relationship with others in a complex environment mediated by another five factors: culture, which concerns values, ideas, and symbols that are useful for communication; social class, which refers to socially established divisions; family; the influence of others; and situations, which can change individual behaviors. By understanding, collecting, and analyzing these elements, it is possible to create an anthropological basis for market segmentation, a classification that will be supported from a symbolic perspective of consumption, rather than solely based on the available numerical data.

Taking the above into account, this study focuses on understanding segmentation variables, identifying the importance of prioritizing these factors to better understand individuals and thus define segments more aligned with business needs regarding relationship strategies in contexts of significant competition, high-quality standards, and consumers and users who are more aware and demanding. This is analyzed from the perspective of the anthropology of consumption, which is

226

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

derived from cultural anthropology and focuses on the study of behaviors, patterns, and cultural meanings, including the phenomenon of consumption of goods and services. It examines objects beyond their functional value to interpret their symbolic value. Based on this, the objective was defined as analyzing concepts from key authors in the anthropology of consumption to establish a deeper understanding of consumer/user segmentation.

Methodology

To address the aforementioned, a study was conducted with a hermeneutic approach, applying a qualitative method to examine market segmentation variables from a symbolic perspective of consumption. For this, a bibliographic review exercise was carried out, focusing on texts that address this phenomenon, and conducting an interpretive reading of the concepts present in them that relate to market segmentation. Since a bibliographic review aims to consolidate existing knowledge in a specific field to facilitate the development of new insights (Lim et al., 2022), it was deemed appropriate to conduct this type of study in order to offer a panoramic view of the body of knowledge in the field of consumer/user classification.

In this regard, to select the bibliographic corpus, interviews were conducted with academic experts in the social sciences, chosen for their relevance to the study object, which is the human being, approached from an individual, social, and cultural perspective. The seven experts interviewed were selected based on their academic background and their relationship to human behavior in terms of consumption practices. They were professors of social sciences, advertising, marketing, economics, and studies related to the topic.

In the interviews with these experts, their academic background and the intellectual currents that have guided their research were explored with the goal of recalling a broad spectrum of authors and theories from different disciplines. This was followed by identifying those that could contribute the most to understanding the forms of human behavior linked to consumption. Based on these elements established during the conversations with the experts, questions were then asked about texts and authors from which concepts applicable to the task of segmentation could be extracted. Thus, the documentary investigation in various disciplines was focused on a series of specific authors and texts from anthropology, due to the direct connection of the texts

227

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

recommended by the experts with the theme of consumption. Within this context, the abstraction of concepts related to segmentation was made possible.

Therefore, an exercise of interpreting bibliographic sources addressing the consumption phenomenon was carried out, reviewing and analyzing five anthropological texts published between 1986 and 2006, in Spanish, English, and Portuguese. From these texts, units of analysis were extracted, which were the concepts addressed by these authors in their theories, relating to the behavior of individuals based on their consumption practices. This allowed for interpreting the phenomenon in light of market segmentation using the selected units of analysis. Table 1 presents the authors and texts selected for the bibliographic review.

Table 1

Authors and texts consulted

Author(s)	Text	Publisher
Douglas & Isherwood (1990)	World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption	Grijalbo
García (1995)	Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts	Grijalbo
Appadurai (1991)	The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective	Grijalbo
McCracken (1986)	Culture and Consumption: A Theoretical Account of the Structure and Movement of the Cultural Meaning of Consumer Goods	Journal of Consumer Research, 13(1), 71–84.
Barbosa & Campbell (2006).	Cultura, Consumo e Identidade	FGV Editora

Source: Prepared by the authors.

228

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

According to Aristizábal (2020), history, sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology laid the foundations for an interdisciplinary field that has highlighted the importance of consumption as a category that allows reflection on topics of great interest to social sciences, such as identity, subjectivity, social, political, and environmental movements, gender and ethnic relations, material culture, domestic and family relations, etc. According to this author, the anthropology of consumption emerged in the late 1980s, establishing consumption as a relevant analytical category for this discipline, offering "new reflections to think about the relationships between the local and the global in societies and their dynamics of consumption" (Aristizábal, 2020, p. 89).

From this perspective, the relevance of key figures in the anthropology of consumption, such as Mary Douglas, Baron Isherwood, Néstor García Canclini, Arjun Appadurai, Grant McCracken, Lívia Barbosa, and Colin Campbell, became evident. These authors address issues related to the relationship between consumption and social classification systems, the civic dimension of consumption, the symbolic load of goods, and consumption as a form of cultural expression and identity construction, not only individual but also collective. In light of this, these authors were selected because they have focused their academic work on the study of the anthropology of consumption, making them key references in the field.

The texts chosen from these scholars were repeatedly mentioned in interviews with experts, as they are the works that most closely address the phenomenon of consumption from an anthropological perspective and apply to market segmentation processes. From reading the publications, concepts were extracted that make up their theories and relate to understanding people through the consumption dynamic, but without forgetting the constructive logic of the theory, that is, knowing that the concepts are not simply isolated elements.

> In the case of social sciences, in particular, additional effort must be made. This effort is to try to read the texts for what they are: constructions, the construct itself; to read them from what we could define as their constructing logics. What we refer to as "constructing logic" is recognizing behind the attributive assertions of properties in a theoretical text the problems the author seeks to answer through such propositions; in other words, recognizing how "X" constructed their problem and how they end up theorizing (Zemelman, 2005, p. 75).

229

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

Thus, the analyzed concepts were recorded in a matrix, in which, after the bibliographic reading and analysis, those that could relate to market segmentation were identified—whether they contributed to the variables commonly used for that purpose or were concepts that could be turned into classification variables for people. In this matrix, the concept was stated and described, and its contribution to the segmentation task was defined, with a final cross-analysis of information to identify the contribution of anthropology to the definition of consumer/user segments. These concepts were differentiation, meanings, socioeconomic level, and income, analyzed from an anthropological perspective. The following concepts are described in the results of this paper.

Results

The findings obtained from the documental analysis have been organized starting from the description of the concepts found, mentioning the authors who developed them and their contribution to market segmentation. In Table 2, the categories and a brief description of them are presented.

Table 2

Categories and descriptions

Category	Description
Differentiation	The process through which people seek to find differential meaning in products and services, identifying themselves through the acquisition and use of certain goods.
Representation	Refers to the shared understanding of the cultural meanings associated with products and services, which allows people to interpret the symbolic value of objects.
Meanings	Refers to the cultural and personal interpretations that are assigned to goods and services, giving them meanings beyond their functional or material value.
Symbolic Loads	These are the cultural and personal meanings attributed to products and services, imbuing them with symbolic

230

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

value in a society and allowing people to express themselves through them.

Source: Prepared by the authors.

«Differentiation» as a segmentation variable

Based on the reading of the texts, it is evident that a key concept brought from anthropology into the study of consumption and segmentation is "differentiation." This concept is developed by García (1995), building on the ideas of Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai, and Stuart Ewen, among others. He states that:

> [...] in contemporary societies, much of the rationality of social relations is constructed not in the struggle for the means of production and the satisfaction of material needs, but in the effort to appropriate the means of distinction (p. 45).

This concept suggests that it is necessary for people to understand what products and services represent for them and for others in order to find a differential meaning in them. If an object holds no particular value for someone, they cannot perceive themselves as different by possessing, using, or displaying it. Similarly, if others do not recognize differentiation in the objects and services used by someone, it becomes impossible for them to recognize that individual as distinct, one who has access to certain products and services that characterize them.

Thus, consumer behaviors serve to divide those who do not consume or have access to certain products and services, while grouping together those who do. However, there is a necessary condition for this: subjects must share the meanings of the objects, meaning they must have the same cultural codes for interpretation. The meaning attributed to products and services is a fundamental aspect in determining the level of interest in them or their complete disinterest and ignorance. As García (1995) puts it:

> [...] if members of a society did not share the meanings of goods, if they were only comprehensible to the elite or the minority that uses them, they would not serve as instruments of differentiation. An imported car or a computer with new functions

231

distinguishes its few owners insofar as those who do not have access to them understand their sociocultural meaning (p. 45).

For example, for an elderly, a traditional person, who has no interest in technology, the functionalities and sensors of new smartwatches or aspects like the connectivity of home sound systems may hold little value, as they are uninterested or even unaware of them. Similarly, for traditional families who cook with basic ingredients and little sophistication, the properties of food such as gluten, probiotics, prebiotics, and amino acids may not matter, since what is important is following the recipe passed down through generations or selecting good ingredients, without delving into the specifics of the food's nutritional composition.

In this regard, companies aiming to reach markets that do not find value in their products and services beyond the material or functional aspects may need to undertake prior educational tasks to help people recognize the potential of their offerings or shift their strategy to focus on other aspects that are familiar to the segments of the population they wish to target. Therefore, access to and the meaning of things for people become segmentation variables, dividing the population between those who understand the symbolic meanings or specific characteristics of products and services and those who do not. This distinction becomes an important consideration in profiling to determine groups of interest and communicational aspects to emphasize.

The meaning of objects and their social interpretation: «meanings»

In connection with the concept of differentiation, based on the reading of the texts, the concept of "meanings" emerges, developed by Douglas and Isherwood (1990). They state: "Each person is a source of judgments and is, in turn, subject to judgments others may make about them; each individual is embedded in a classification scheme whose discriminations they are helping to establish" (p. 91). This concept indicates that social agents are constantly ritualizing life through objects or actions to which they assign symbolic meanings. As a result, marketing departments in companies must ask: What do their products and services mean to people? How do their products or services fit into the symbolic framework of their audience? Because meanings are embedded in various everyday ritual elements:

> [...] living without rituals is like living without precise meanings and perhaps even without memories... the most effective rituals use material objects, and the more expensive the ritual instruments, the more persistent the intention to fix the meanings (Douglas & Isherwood, 1990, p. 88).

In this way, we can observe that there are objects with significant, culturally recognized symbolic loads, which influence people's decisions to buy certain goods. The use of these products expresses specific intentions to others, meaning that the products transcend their material value and acquire a personal meaning associated with a particular lifestyle. In Appadurai's (1991) words: "It is difficult to consider the desire for goods as something soluble or independent of culture, and demand as a natural and mechanical response to the availability of goods and money to buy them" (p. 47).

Prestige brands are commonly recognized for their symbolic weight, as over the years they have been imbued with status and are valued culturally for this reason. However, the meaning attached to goods applies to all types of products, whether they are for sustenance, replenishment, social, or ceremonial purposes. It is easy to fall into the error of thinking that only luxury items are symbolically loaded; even the most basic products are filled with meaning and convey messages to other members of society, whether deliberately or not. This nuance can be observed in Douglas and Isherwood (1990):

> The commodities that provide the satisfaction of physical needs—eating or drinking—are as loaded with meaning as ballet or poetry. Let us put an end once and for all to the widespread and misleading distinction between goods that sustain life and health and goods that serve the mind and the heart (p. 88).

In this regard, it is important to consider "luxury goods not so much in contrast to needs (a problematic option), but as goods whose primary use is rhetorical and social—goods that are simply embodied signs" (Appadurai, 1991, p. 56).

Thus, the variable of "meanings" of products and services for people becomes highly significant in the mix of factors for segmentation. By delving into this characteristic, it becomes possible to identify ways of grouping audiences for product design or communication strategies that align with their feelings regarding objects and the social interpretation of these items.

233

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

Anthropological contributions to the classification of audiences by socioeconomic level and income

In market segmentation exercises, a typical variable used is related to the Socioeconomic Level (SL), which is generally associated with the income levels of individuals and families. By understanding the purchasing power of a population, it is possible to determine the ease or difficulty with which certain products or services can be acquired (Fernández, 2009).

Different countries have managed to create socioeconomic classifications for their populations, placing the segment with the lowest SL (i.e., with the lowest purchasing power) at one extreme and the highest level at the other, with intermediate gradations determining the possibility of access to or purchase of products and services.

For example, in Colombia, the SL is divided into A, B, C, and D (each composed of subgroups), with A representing the population with the lowest income generation capacity, and D being the population considered not poor or vulnerable. In Argentina, there is a gradation from low to high, classifying people as E, D2, D1, C3, C2, C1, and AB. In Mexico, the classification starts with the lowest and ends with the highest, using the categories E, D, D+, C, C+, and AB. In this way, each country has its conventional policies for segmenting the population by socioeconomic levels (Fernández, 2009). However, this type of segmentation is not only carried out at the national level to determine social services and assistance, but companies also use it to classify their audiences, alongside including variables related to geographical area, average ticket (the amount spent by individuals when making purchases), number of visits, among others.

However, when looking at this variable from an anthropological perspective (Barbosa & Campbell, 2006), it is important to avoid stereotyping audiences based on the SL they belong to. One should not expect typical behaviors from low and high-income classes regarding consumption—where the former limits their purchases to basic needs and the latter can afford luxury goods. Therefore, it would be erroneous to categorically deduce that the lowest segments only access basic necessities, while luxury goods are reserved for another population due to being unaffordable. As Barbosa and Campbell (2006) state:

234

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

[...] Consumerism implies a moral economy, the premises of which are only discernible when we scrutinize the categories of conflict that inform our practices and social representations. In addition to the need to morally justify what we consume, different goods make some more legitimate than others. While this hierarchy is not rigid, but contextual, there are crystallized cultural meanings surrounding certain goods and social practices that transcend some contexts and end up classifying people by what they consume. (p. 39)

This relates to the Socioeconomic Level (SL) of individuals, as even today, questions persist regarding the consumption dynamics of lower-income classes when they access high-end products like televisions, sound systems, or premium mobile phones, while still trying to address more basic needs such as housing or food. This situation appeals to an ascending satisfaction aspiration similar to the one established in Maslow's pyramid (1991). From these premises, the income variable—meaning the amount of money individuals earn each month—has been configured as a conditioning factor for classifying audiences: "income has been an important variable to distinguish different market segments, as it is an indicator of the capacity (or inability) to bear the cost of a product or a specific version of a given offer" (Schiffman & Lazar, 2010, p. 62).

However, in light of readings from the anthropology of consumption, this element should not only be analyzed as a number, where the higher the number, the greater the possibility of access to a variety of products or services, and the lower it is, the less access one has. Although purchasing power will always be a conditioning factor in consumption, factors such as credit and others like distinction can incentivize purchasing practices that alter this logic. In this regard, Douglas and Isherwood (1990) assert:

It is evident that the established income for any given year does not constitute a determining factor for consumption models. During a bad period, people tend to consider their mutual obligations to give and receive services as fixed and will resort to credit to maintain their standard of living; on the other hand, if people think that a good year will be exceptional and take time to repeat, they are unlikely to allow this circumstance to significantly alter their consumption routine. The only reliable method to discover consumption models in modern industrial society would be to direct attention to the use of goods for social

235

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

purposes. Only if used systematically, the consumption criterion that market researchers rely on could give a good idea of what social classes are (p. 194).

From an anthropological perspective, the analysis of income is done alongside spending, with the allocation of resources being influenced by various factors such as health status, habitat location, or household composition. Thus, a family with low income may not have access to the same quality of products and services as a higher-income family; however, the family with higher income may have children, which would lead them to allocate part of their resources to their children's education, food, and entertainment—obligations that households without children would not have. These households might reserve their income for luxury goods, travel, and leisure, among others, which from a simple view, would be considered exclusive to higher-income segments.

Conclusions

This inquiry highlights the importance of factors such as differentiation, representation, meanings, and symbolic burdens of products/services in customer classification processes. These factors enable brands to establish more complex segmentation criteria, transcending traditional demographic, geographic, and numerical aspects.

After reviewing existing literature related to segmentation tasks, it is clear that the variables commonly used for this purpose remain considerably relevant for audience classification. However, an anthropological perspective on this field contributes to thinking about consumers beyond what defines them by their income, location, age, gender, and other variables. Concepts such as differentiation, representation, and meanings emerge as highly significant. Moreover, from an anthropological standpoint, alternative perspectives on variables like income and socioeconomic level (SL) can be explored.

The symbolic burden that accompanies goods becomes a classification variable with significant implications for marketing strategies. On one hand, it aids in recognizing audiences who perceive and find value in these symbols; on the other, it helps understand what these symbols consist of, as in many cases, they are driven by corporate strategies but, in other instances, socially accrue value without direct intervention from brands.

236

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
Universidad de Nariño

It is important to recognize that the meanings linked to objects are not exclusively associated with high-priced products or aspirational categories. Goods of all types carry meanings, even if they are not related to status. Therefore, companies can use the meanings of products and services for audience classification, grouping them based on what these products signify or could come to signify for the target segment.

On the other hand, a typical bias when defining segments using the SL variable is to assume that a person belonging to a certain level automatically exhibits a set of purchasing behaviors, attitudes, and so on, falling into population stereotypes related to class. It is commonly observed that consumption behaviors do not necessarily align with SL, whether it is low or high. For example, it is common to see people from lower SL backgrounds accessing luxury products while struggling to address basic needs. Thus, the SL in which a person is classified can provide clues about their consumption behaviors, but it does not confine them to these behaviors.

In this regard, it was evident that, from an anthropological perspective, the variables of income and SL acquire new meanings. The first is analyzed in conjunction with spending, and the second emphasizes the importance of not stereotyping individuals based solely on their SL membership. These contributions enable companies, when conducting segmentation exercises, to develop more robust classificatory structures.

Furthermore, segmentation based on the variables of differentiation and meanings represents new classificatory perspectives derived from the analysis within the framework of consumption anthropology. Through these perspectives, marketing departments and customer research areas can find explanations for the behaviors of their audiences and gain the ability to classify them, considering the cultural codes that products and services hold for the population. This requires understanding what these products and services represent both for the individuals themselves and for others, in order to find a differential meaning in consumer goods. Access and meaning thus emerge as public segmentation variables, helping to classify the population into those who understand the symbolic burdens or unique characteristics of products and services and those who do not. This is reflected across all types of offerings—whether for subsistence, replenishment, social, or ceremonial purposes—since symbolic meaning is not reserved solely for luxury goods. This highlights a challenge for marketing and research departments, which must take these

anthropological perspectives into account when conducting their classificatory exercises, incorporating complementary variables to the sociodemographic and quantitative factors typically used.

Ethical Considerations

This research did not require ethical approval, as it was based on a documental review.

Conflict of Interest

All authors made significant contributions to the document and declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Author Contribution Statement

Juan Felipe Mejía Giraldo: Validation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – review and editing, Supervision.
Adrián Valencia Gómez: Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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239

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Universidad de Nariño

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240

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241

Rev. Tend. ISSN-E 2539-0554. Vol. XXV N°1, 220-243 – January-June 2024
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