

THE VANCOUVER SUN

Which tribe do you belong to?

Market researchers are slotting us into distinct urban cultures to better sell us goods

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Who are we?

As it turns out, we are our neighbourhoods.

It's easy to be deceived by our apparent sameness, the endless repeating sequence of Starbucks and Subways and Superstores, set amid the region's quickly cloning megahouses, townhouse clusters, and towers.

But look more closely and Vancouver turns into a collection of Balkan villages, each with its own language and customs and traditional costumes.

We know it instinctively, when we cross into a part of the region that seems foreign and then come back to our home base to regale friends and neighbours with tales of our adventures into the alien cultures of dog- and arugula-loving Yaletown or Port Coquitlam townhouseland or the vast split-level world of certain parts of Surrey.

Now those cultures are getting names. Southeast Vancouver? Home base to the region's most dominant group -- and the most distinctively B.C. group in the whole country -- Asian Up-and-Comers. The West End is the epicentre of the next largest sub-culture, the young midscale urban singles of the Grads and Pads clan. North Van around Grand Boulevard is the Upward Bounds, suburban families whose homes are messy teen dorms. King George around 72nd to 88th Avenue is the heart of the region's distinctive South Asian Society.

They're among 66 tribes in Canada that have been identified in the most comprehensive national system yet developed for naming all those cultures.

The Canadian company Environics, using an American geodemographics-analysing tool as a base, has incorporated everything from Canadian census data to Environics' social-values surveys to information about car-buying patterns to put us into clusters with names ranging from Urbane Villagers to New Homesteaders to Park Bench Seniors.

You might not agree with them. You might say, "But I don't belong to any of these."

But you'd better get used to them because, like it or not, there's a good chance that someone trying to convince you to buy a car, donate to their cause, or support their political group will use something like this to appeal to you directly.

That's because geodemographics, as this kind of cluster-naming is labelled, may be imperfect, but it's the most sophisticated instrument around so far to try to understand social tribes in a way that goes beyond the utilitarian male/female, young/old, rich/poor used by early marketers and social analysts.

It is based on a couple of premises.

One is that our decisions about buying are based on the values group that we are part of. The other is that people who have the same values live together.

Geodemographics analysts don't buy into the popular idea that we live in virtual communities.

"People move into neighbourhoods where there are people like them or people they'd like to become like," says Jan Kestle, the president of Environics, who has spent 30 years studying these kinds of social groupings and led the team that developed this new set of clusters. There will be "outliers" in any neighbourhood -- a minority who don't fit into the dominant pattern. But in general, the rule is that "birds of a feather flock together."

In Canada, a country made up of defined regions originally brought together by necessity rather than culture, that means even the clusters of clusters are distinct.

Some clusters don't appear in B.C. at all, like the nine francophone groups that include Villes Tranquilles and Les Quebecois Sportifs or Ontario groups like the Ontario Originals or New Italy.

The top three groups that are more likely to be found in B.C. than anywhere else are the Asian Up-and-Comers (80 per cent); the New Homesteaders, rural midscale households in blue-collar and service jobs (50 per cent); and South Asian Society (42 per cent).

Pets and PCs is more of a western tribe, while Asian Affluence is more predominant in Toronto than Vancouver.

That tendency to coagulate means that identifying geodemographic clusters helps retailers decide where to put stores, what range of products to put in those stores, and how to advertise them locally. It also particularly helps ad agencies and direct-mail advertisers decide what kind of language and images to use to connect with their target group the most vividly.

Dean Dalke, a young Vancouver lawyer who epitomizes the Grads and Pads clan, sometimes has a sense that that certain kinds of ads have been designed to appeal to him (or at least to his idealized version of himself) exactly that way.

In the ads he sees in the elevator of his apartment building at Nelson and Jervis, the ads for financial services or electronics show people around his age who have great jobs where they make a lot of money and have a lot of control.

The age part matches reality, while the other parts don't, but they resonate with what he and his friends would like for their lives.

"We don't want to necessarily work for The Man in the traditional sense, but we do want professional success."

But advertisers and researchers are quick to observe there are limitations.

Bill Baker, managing director of the Vancouver office of DDB Canada, says he's worked with geodemographics in the United States since it became popular 10 years ago.

"It's an excellent thing. It does provide a much richer portrait of the people you're going after."

But one of its limitations is that it provides so much information that sometimes it leaves advertisers more confused than they were before.

"It's overwhelming at first," says Baker, whose firm has been ranked the country's most creative agency. "We quickly found that this is not necessarily going to give you the answer."

Then the trick for anyone trying to figure out what appeals to which group is to figure out which part of our contradictory personalities is the true one.

"All of us have contradictory views because we don't connect the dots," says Steven Rosell, a California-based partner in the company Viewpoints Learning, which has developed techniques to try to understand the often-opposing opinions and values that co-exist in all of us.

Rosell's business partner, Daniel Yankelovich, is the legendary pioneer of segmentation analysis, the move to try to understand society as distinct tribes with different values.

But Yankelovich has come to believe that advertisers hijacked the concept and mistakenly made the assumption that people's values are connected to their buying decisions.

A lot of the geodemographics research, says Rosell, "has been wasted money. People have spent millions and it doesn't help sell the product."

But people -- not just marketers and political campaigners, but average folks -- continue to be fascinated with geodemographics because it at least tries to make sense of what has become an overwhelming world where there's nothing more mysterious than the behaviour of the people all around us.

EXACT LOCATION: DO THESE LIVING EXAMPLES CONFIRM THE DATA?:

DENIZENS OF SUBURBAN ROWS

Natural habitat: East side of Coast Meridian Road, between Prairie and Dominion avenues, Port Coquitlam.

In this California valley-style suburb, filled with new mini-malls, and a mix of gabled townhouses and homes, Helen Li and Jason Wu are making a new life in Canada. Li, who used to run an import-export business in Beijing, and Wu, who used to run one of China's most popular fashion magazines, now run a drycleaning business and focus most of their attention on their two girls. They had money in booming China until they left five years ago; now they want mainly a healthy life.

"In China, there's big, big pressure all the time. We didn't have a family life because it's all working, working, and money, " says Li. "I think the life here is healthier."

Wu agrees. What he wants most is more time with his daughters. Oh, and maybe a Hummer.

DAYTRIPPERS AND NIGHT OWLS

Natural habitat: Lonsdale Avenue and Third Street W., North Vancouver; in New Westminister, Royal Avenue, between Fourth and Eighth

Chandra Purser is walking her white Maltese along Royal Avenue near the apartment she shares with her boyfriend, enjoying the sunshine on one of her days off, when she stops to talk about her cluster. She works nights at New Westminster's Fever Nightclub just off Columbia and dabbles in part-time acting, including a role that was cut from Scary Movie 3, and a Bud Light commercial played during the Super Bowl.

Purser, 28, doesn't completely fit the "daytrippers and night owls" slot -- she's out of the dating and mating game, and she and her boyfriend only go to clubs a couple of times a month. As a couple, they're better off economically than singles. She rollerblades, works out at a gym, and goes for long walks.

ASIAN UP-AND-COMERS

Natural habitat: 33rd Avenue near Commercial and Victoria, Vancouver.

We're very Canadian, Bill Yuen keeps saying. He and his family go on cruises for holidays. He and his wife eat out with their 20-something children at places like Burnaby Mountain's Horizons or Griffin's restaurant downtown.

And they don't try to force their kids to do anything, except to be good people who give back to their community.

Yuen, who came to Canada from Hong Kong in 1972, works at Canada Post as a sales executive and his wife, Winnie, works there as a benefits clerk.

But he's always gotten involved in community work, which included six years as a Vancouver school trustee.

His family is financially well off and he's using that base to help his children. His daughter, Vivian, articling at a downtown law firm, and son Bob, a library assistant, are welcome to live at home indefinitely to help them save money for the future.

GRADS AND PADS CLAN

Natural habitat: Robson Street, between Burrard and Cardero, Vancouver.

The only part of the description of the grads and pads clan that Dean Dalke quibbles with is the word "night owl."

"I would be more of a night owl if I didn't get up so early for work," says Dalke, a 29-year-old freshly minted lawyer who works for a major law firm downtown and lives at Nelson and Jervis.

The one-time south Surrey resident now goes out to pubs and nightclubs frequently with his friends, who all live downtown or in Kits, skis a fair bit, has an art-gallery membership (though he hasn't been yet) went to the Velvet Revolver and U2 concerts recently, and is going to Moby next week.

Involvement in social causes: He did volunteer work in Africa for a small development group that focuses on water projects and micro-enterprise, and he taught school in Mauritania.

SOUTH ASIAN SOCIETY

Natural habitat: West of King George, between 88th and 72nd avenues, Surrey.

If there's one thing that Baljit Brar wants out of life, it's for his children to do better than him. Although Brar nominally fits into the south Asian society cluster, classified as "suburban upscale ethnic," it's been a hard slog for him and his wife. He didn't get a good education, so he ended up working at a foundry for 16 years until it folded and, for the past five years, at a propane company. Now, the two oldest girls are registered nurses, one is heading for nursing school, one is trying to get into the RCMP, and the youngest, an 18-year-old boy, is aiming to become a heavy-duty mechanic or electrician. "I don't want them to be labourers like me," says Brar, who paid off his house in 1994 and then went back into debt to finance his children's schooling.

OUR MINDS AND WALLETS MAPPED:

A new consumer research system has opened up the minds and consumer behaviour of Canadians in ways never before possible. Whether or not you like being pigeonholed, Environics Analytics has found a category for you in one of its 66 lifestyle "clusters" covering all 32 million Canadians. Based on the notion that birds of a feather flock together, the system uses vast quantities of computer-analysed data to define neighbourhoods as small as 20 square blocks and who is likely to live in them.

This map shows the 15 most prevalent clusters in the Vancouver region.

1. ASIAN UP-AND-COMERS

Who they are: Successful middle-aged Asian families

About them: Common in Vancouver, they are often new immigrants from China as well as the Philippines, Vietnam and South Asia. More than one third speak Chinese, nearly two-thirds a language other than English and 60 per cent are foreign born. Incomes just average. Above-average savings levels and lofty home values result in upscale spending patterns.

Income: \$60,082

Age: Middle

Ethnic presence: High (Chinese)

Part of this larger group: Suburban Upscale Ethnic. With children of varying ages who play sports, they are enthusiastic participants in the North American lifestyle that first beckoned them to this continent.

14.7%: Share of population

2. DAYTRIPPERS & NIGHT OWLS

Who they are: Young lower-middle-class urban singles and couples

About them: In city and suburban neighbourhoods these young, unattached Canadians seek active lifestyles. A disproportionate number spend their leisure time going to bars, rock concerts, coffee shops and dance clubs. Top sports include yoga, swimming, soccer and tennis. The dating-and-mating dance is in full swing among these tolerant folk.

\$41,096

Age: Young

Ethnic presence: Some (Chinese/S.E. Asian)

Part of this larger group: Urban Downscale. The least affluent social group, they are the young and restless.

9.4 %: Share of population

3. SOUTH ASIAN SOCIETY

Who they are: Young upper-middle-class South Asian families

About them: A new wave of immigrants from Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Younger, they have come for the North American Dream in suburban Canada. Average educations, skilled blue-collar and service jobs, upper-middle-class incomes and child-centred lifestyles. A high rate of going to school to get ahead.

Income: \$68,746

Age: Younger

Ethnic presence: High (South Asian)

Part of this larger group: Suburban Upscale Ethnic (see Asian Up-and-Comers)

7.5 %: Share of population

4. GRADS & PADS

Who they are: Young midscale urban singles

About them: Young, ethnically-diverse city dwellers living near universities. The nation's most liberal lifestyle. A mix of well-educated, politically active singles, students and recent grads, service workers and professionals. Incomes not high, but new workforce members love spending freely. Three-quarters unattached; they are night owls who frequent health clubs, rock concerts, and galleries.

Income: \$42,289

Age: Young

Ethnic presence: Some (Mixed)

Part of this larger group: Urban Young. Three clusters where most household maintainers are under 40 years old. Often community activists who volunteer for liberal social causes and political groups.

7%: Share of population

5. SUBURBAN ROWS

Who they are: Young and comfortable immigrant families in suburbia

About them: Younger, upper-middle-class immigrant families in new suburban townhouses. More than a quarter are visible minorities: 5 per cent black, 5 per cent South Asian and the rest a mix of Asians and South Americans. With their college educations and service sector jobs, these newcomers have found opportunity and material comfort in their adopted homeland.

Income: \$62,111

Age: Younger

Ethnic presence: Some (Mixed)

Part of this larger group: Suburban Upscale Ethnic (see Asian Up-and-Comers and South Asian Society)

6.9 %: Share of population

6. UPWARD BOUND

Who they are: Middle-aged families in suburban comfort

About them: Upper-middle-class, suburban homeowners with teens leading an enviable lifestyle in sprawling, leafy neighbourhoods. Home to white collar and service workers in management and technical fields. Homes are less decorator showcases than messy teen dorms. Prefer "a home that is not too neat."

Income: \$70,740

Age: Middle-Aged

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Suburban Midscale. Low-stress leisure lifestyles are preferred, going out to casual dining restaurants, museums, casinos and art galleries. Older homes and used trucks a common theme.

5.8 %: Share of population

7. MR. & MS. MANAGER

Who they are: High-achieving dual-income households in exurbia

About them: These prosperous executives like their toys: multiple computers, large-screen TV sets and collections of sporting equipment. Enjoy golf, skiing, baseball and exercising at home. Have above-average incomes and education, but not particularly intellectual. Prefer to watch hockey over the news.

Income: \$88,255

Age: Middle-Aged

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Exurban Elite. The three wealthiest lifestyle types outside the nation's metropolitan sprawl, beyond the suburbs but within reasonable commutes of city jobs. Inextricably tied to their cars.

4.3 %: Share of population

8. GREY PRIDE

Who they are: Midscale suburban apartment-dwelling seniors

About them: A middle-class mix of over-60 singles, couples, widows and widowers living in urban- and suburban-fringe apartments. Getting by on comfortable fixed incomes, cluster residents maintain a relaxed lifestyle, socializing with friends. Enjoy television sports, Bravo, sitcoms like "Ed" and "Becker." One in four aged over 75.

Income: \$48,990

Age: Mature

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Suburban Midscale (see Upward Bound)

4.3 %: Share of population

9. SUBURBAN GENTRY

Who they are: Well-off middle-aged suburban families

About them: The Suburban Gentry segment is a magnet for Canada's business class: a prosperous suburban world of dual-income couples who have university degrees and large families, typically with teenagers. High percentage of managers and self-employed professionals. Likely to declare, "regular exercise is an important part of my life."

Income: \$111,254

Age: Middle

Ethnic Presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Suburban Elite. The most upscale suburban social group, characterized by young and middle-aged families living in recently built homes.

4.1 %: Share of population

10. ELECTRIC AVENUES

Who they are: Young upper-middle-class urban singles

About them: Young singles and couples living urban lifestyles. Despite average incomes, spending power appears greater because so many are childless. Like their younger cousins in Grads & Pads, spend freely on entertainment, designer clothes and cultural events. Devote more time to tracking their investments and less time patronizing the local nightclub.

Income: \$62,094

Age: Young

Ethnic Presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Urban Young (see Grads & Pads)

3.7 %: Share of population

11. URBAN SPICE

Who they are: Young multi-ethnic lower-middle-class singles

About them: A mixed populace of blacks, Arabs and immigrants from Asia, Europe and Latin America. A mecca for educated, first-generation Canadians striving for middle-class status. Apartment-dwellers, they gather at health clubs, art galleries, basketball courts, soccer fields and music clubs. Rank highest among all clusters in working for a political party or candidate.

Income: \$44,248

Age: Young

Ethnic Presence: High (Mixed)

Part of this larger group: Urban Downscale Ethnic. Many are arrived in Canada since 1990. Pursue active social lives, using dating services and going to restaurants, health clubs and online chat sites.

4.3 %: Share of population

12. FAST-TRACK FAMILIES

Who they are: Upper-middle-class exurban Boomer families

About them: Known for active lifestyles. Mostly married homeowners who work in service sector or white collar professions; about half have children. Close to many outdoor amenities. Close enough to big cities to expose their kids to culture through the occasional visit to a museum or art gallery. Emphatic about equality of the sexes.

Income: \$64,714

Age: Middle

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Exurban Midscale. With their communities outside the big cities, the cost of living is lower, and residents pursue leisure-intensive lifestyles. A strong market for family-style restaurants.

2.8 %: Share of population

13. PARK BENCH SENIORS

Who they are: Downscale seniors in urban high-rises

About them: Canada's oldest lifestyle. Tend to live in older, seniors-oriented high-rise apartment buildings and typically get by on modest pensions. Most never made it beyond high school and spent their working lives at blue-collar jobs. Lifestyles are unpretentious. They do support the arts, but concede that they rarely go out to restaurants and aren't too keen on entertaining at home.

Income: \$31,362

Age: Mature

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Urban Downscale (see Daytrippers & Nightowls)

2.8 %: Share of population

14. MONEY & BRAINS

Who they are: Upscale and educated professionals and their families

About them: High incomes, advanced degrees and sophisticated tastes match their credentials. Many are married couples with few children who live in older, fashionable homes on small, manicured lots in urban and suburban areas. Support the arts, buy lots of books, listen to classical music, travel abroad and subscribe to business, news and travel magazines. Politically active.

Income: \$91,815

Age: Older

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Urban Elite. The social group that ranks at the top of many demographic measures: income, home value and educational achievement.

2.5 %: Share of population

15. YOUNG DIGERATI

Who they are: Young and well-off urban trendsetters

About them: Tech-savvy singles and couples in fashionable in-town neighbourhoods. Affluent, highly educated and ethnically mixed areas. Abound in tasteful high-rise apartments and expensive condos with home offices, fitness clubs, clothing boutiques, casual restaurants and all types of bars - from juice to coffee to microbrew. Not simply acquisitive materialists; many are socially-conscious consumers.

Income: \$92,228

Age: Younger

Ethnic presence: Low

Part of this larger group: Urban Young (see Grads & Pads and Electric Avenues)

2.2 %: Share of population

THE OTHER 18 %

The 15 clusters shown above account for about 82 per cent of Vancouver region residents. Most of the rest fall into these clusters:

Urbane Villagers 1.7%

Mobility Blues 1.6%

Asian Affluence 1.5%

Tools & Trucks 1.5%

Exurban Crossroads 1.5%

Newcomers Rising 1.4%

Pets & PCs 1.3%

Single City Renters 1.3%

Solo Scramble 1.2%

Startups & Seniors 0.9%

Winner's Circle 0.9%

Rooms with a View 0.8%

White Picket Fences 0.8%

Heartlanders 0.5%

Simple Pleasures 0.4%

Pie charts depict only the top 15 categories for the Vancouver census region, excluding the 18 per cent of the population that does not fit into one of the categories. The percentage values given for each category are a share of the total population.

Source: Environics Analytics