

The Impact Of Reference Groups On Attitudes Toward Luxury Brands: An Investigation Into The Influence Of Normative And Aspirational Reference Groups On Young Adult Consumer Attitude

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Abstract: This study investigated how different reference groups, particularly aspirational and normative groups, impacted the attitude of young adults in relation to luxury goods and brands. A sample of 200 respondents took a survey, and a number of statistical tests were conducted to test the hypotheses and answer the research questions of this study. Paired-sample t-tests proved that normative reference groups, like family and friends, had a far significant effect than aspirational figures, and family, friends had a stronger effect than social media platforms. However, there was no significant difference between how much close friends and celebrities influenced respondents. Nonparametric correlations proved that both aspirational and normative reference group influence and materialistic values were not significantly but positively linked. However, these connections were not statistically significant. A chi-square test proved that there was no statistically significant difference in how frequently respondents reported that celebrities were their key source of influence compared to friends and family. Yet, a Mann-Whitney U test displayed that respondents who found celebrities as their main chief reference group had a much more materialistic attitude toward luxury brands. These results proved that normative effects continue to remain significant in the buying intention, and they also showed how celebrity culture impacts materialism in a broader manner.

Keywords: Reference Group Influence, Materialism, Luxury Brands, Normative Influence, Aspirational Influence, Celebrity Endorsement, Consumer Attitudes, Social Influence

INTRODUCTION

People attach a lot of importance about luxury brands, and young adults particularly see them as symbols of status. Luxury goods are no longer just about wealth and standing apart; they are now powerful ways to display your identity, where you stand in society, and how you see your own image, your self-perception. Luxury brands can absolutely help young adults derive meaning of their lives and the world surrounding them. This aligns with what they want to do with their lives, being successful, and be admired and adulated by their peers. In the digital era, when social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube make luxury products even more conspicuous and appealing, this symbol of value is especially important. Interacting with a luxury brand on social media isn't a commercial act; it's a kind of performance. It's a way to project your preference, display that you belong, or exhibit that you long for something. Such developments have made it easier for reference groups such as peers and role models (like celebrities and influencers), to alter the feelings young people experience about luxury items.

There are several aspects to attitudes, they are cognitive, emotional, and conative parts. The affect dimension is highly relevant to luxury branding, as young consumers who connect luxury brands to feelings of vanity, self-assurance, or societal standing/ ranking may indulge in impulsive buying behaviour of several products. The conative component, reflective of behavioural objectives, driven by the desire to obtain, utilize, or display luxury items as a manner of adhering to social norms or enhancing self-respect. We can gain insight into interplay between established reference groups, like the normative influences of peers and the aspirational modelling offered by celebrities and influencers, by linking these attitudinal dimensions to social influence models. As impact both the emotional connect of luxury brands and their relevance to conative component of attitude.

Social media is a huge way for these reference group influences to get through because it always displays curated lifestyles and commercial messages that make luxury seem more significant. To create aspirational

brand associations, influencers and famous people tell stories with pictures and words. In contrast, peers provide a bunch of rules that either espouse or go against a brand's intentional consumption tendencies. It's more challenging to tell the difference between ads and social activity when people post about luxury items on social media. This makes interacting with brands a socially accepted thing to do. In these cases, reference groups help people compare, find, and confirm who they are as consumers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Young adults are a significant group for brands in the business of luxury because they have more financial resources to spend, and their psycho-social needs vary from those of other groups. Young adults are not always bothered by how useful or functional a good is unlike older consumers. Instead, they imagine luxury items help them exhibit who they are, make themselves feel good, and conform to others. It is important to know how attitudes are formed to understand this behaviour. There are several personal and external factors that influence these attitudes, and reference groups find themselves as being a key factor. Reference groups, such as friends, family, role models, and people you admire, help people understand who they are and how exactly they fit in with other individuals. As far as luxury brands and how people use them to project their lifestyle is concerned, this is particularly true.

Additionally, social media has transformed the way reference groups affect people. Instagram shows lifestyles that are well curated and brand connections all the time. This makes societal norms and objectives stronger for young adults. These social media spaces not only offers influencers and peers more strength to influence, but they also alter how people think and what they desire. An extensive examination of the reasons behind young adults' perceptions of luxury goods is possible with the integration of attitude formation theory, reference group dynamics, and social media influence.

This review of literature weaves theoretical and empirical research on consumer attitudes, reference groups, and the facilitator role of social media, especially in regards to young adults' consumption of luxury goods.

Attitude Formation and Its Components in Consumer Behaviour

Since the inception of the field, social psychology has placed a high priority on the study of attitude formation and change. Research on attitudes offers a window into the conceptual framework, sheds light on the intricacies of human social behaviour, and implies the relationship between beliefs and behaviours. Early attitude research was fuelled by advances in measurement, which are essential for the scientific investigation of any phenomenon (Crano & Gardikiotis, 2015)

Despite being intuitively logical, the notion that customer attitudes predict behaviour needs to be viewed cautiously in light of the substantial amount of research that has been done on the relationship between attitudes and behaviour over the past 40 years. Take efforts to comprehend environmentally conscious consumer behaviour, for instance. An attitude indicator of environmental concern is the most common explanatory construct in this field. Regrettably, indicators of environmental concern typically do not accurately predict these kinds of eco-friendly consumer behaviours (Haugtvedt & Herr, 2008).

Luxury Brands and the Young Consumer Segment

The interaction between luxury companies and young people is becoming more important since younger people have more money to spend and different tastes. Young people, especially Millennials and Gen Z, have changed the luxury market by putting more value on both the symbolic and experiential components of buying things. One important thing that several studies have shown is that young people buy luxury products not just because they work well, but also to show off, express themselves, and feel good about themselves (Sharma, Pradhan, & Srivastava, 2021).

Social elements including reference groups, family roles, and perceived social standing have a big impact on how people buy luxury goods. Young individuals often buy expensive things to get approval, show that they fit in with their friends, or improve their image in their social circles. In a growing market, this behavior can occasionally lead to "unexpected consumers," like those who don't have a lot of money but yet buy luxury goods to fit in with societal norms (Ciornea & Băcilă, 2012).

Overall, the change in luxury consumption driven by young people points to a movement away from seeing luxury as something that is only useful to seeing it as a complex experience based on identity, emotion, and social meaning. Brands that use emotional branding, social proof, and digital interaction to appeal to these different motives are more likely to keep younger customers loyal over time.

Reference Groups and Social Influence on Brand Attitudes

Reference groups are very important for defining how people feel about brands since they are standards for social comparison, identity expression, and following the rules. Informative, utilitarian, and value-expressive methods are made use of by these groups to impact consumer's preferences for brands, how they evaluate products, and their intentions to purchase them (Bearden & Etzel, 1982).

Recent studies also indicate that reference groups impact more than simply what products consumers prefer; they also impact how consumers feel about brands, which is known as a kind of self-brand relationships. These relationships are based on consumer's desire to validate or improve themselves. When aspirational groups suggest a brand, it makes consumers feel more connected to it (Escalas & Bettman, 2003). This connection is especially significant among younger adults, whose friends' approval and online presence have a significant impact on the brands they want to consume (Kovitcharoenkul & Anantachart, 2018).

To summarise, reference groups impact how consumers feel about brands by drawing comparisons, placing identities, and impacting peers. The effect is most substantial in product categories with some symbolic value and digital contexts, where influencers and peer groups determine what a brand means and its desirability.

The Role of Social Media as a Mediator of Reference Group Influence

Social media has deeply impacted the way individuals interact with peer groups, influencers, and brands, transforming it into a serious mediator of reference group influence. Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok are key examples of social media that allow users in real time to see, imitate, and converse with both traditional and digital reference group. Influencers are like new-age reference groups that can change how users feel about a brand. Studies indicate that online influencers can transform how a brand is perceived by its audience by altering how perception of its typicality. This can make a brand be viewed as homogeneous one or aspirational one (Lee & Junqué de Fortuny, 2021).

Millennials and Gen Z shoppers are more vulnerable to reference group influences on social media, especially on sites that sell things. They say that referents, like influencers, peers, and experts, affect how they shop online in more ways than just what they see. They also impact how they feel and how they want to be (Goldberg & Kotze, 2022). But unlike old forms of conformity, many young people don't actively seek acceptance. Instead, they take in principles and identities from their digital reference groups in a selective way.

In short, social media changes how reference groups affect people by making group norms more visible, accessible, and personal. This strengthens brand attitudes and behaviours through emotional and cognitive routes. It doesn't just act as a media; it also affects consumer identity and peer-based influence. Based on these findings, the suggested hypotheses will focus on the varying impacts of aspirational and normative reference groups, as well as how materialism impacts the influence of reference groups. These theories fill in important gaps in what we know about how social context and individual beliefs impact young people's opinions toward luxury brands in the digital age.

Hypotheses:

H₀1: There is no significant difference between the impact of aspirational reference groups and normative groups on the attitude of young adults towards luxury brands

HA₁: Aspirational reference groups have a significantly greater impact on the attitude of young adults toward luxury brands than the impact of normative groups

H₀2: There is no correlation between the impact of reference groups and the level of materialism among young adults

HA₂: There exists a correlation between the impact of reference groups and the level of materialism among young adults

Research Gaps

There is a lot of study on how reference groups affect how people make decisions. Though, not many studies look at how these groups impact the emotional and behavioral parts of views toward luxury brands, especially among adolescents who spend a lot of time online. We need to do further research to figure out how differences between persons could influence these impacts.

Statement of Problem

Luxury brands are no longer only about money; they're also about class, identity, and sending social signals. As young people learn about brands and more linked to one other, groups of people they look up

to, like friends, social media influencers, and celebrities, start to affect how they feel about luxury products. But how do these reference groups really change people's minds? Do they do it differently depending on the type of group or the consumer's traits?

Objectives

1. To understand what kind of reference groups have the biggest impact on young adult's attitude toward luxury brands.
2. To study how influence works through reference groups upon young adults in relation to materialism.

Theoretical Framework

Reference Group Theory (Hyman, 1942; Kelley, 1952): Suggests individuals embrace beliefs or behaviours of groups they relate to or wish to join.

Social Comparison Theory (Festinger, 1954): People assess their image by comparing themselves with other individuals, impacting brand attitudes.

Research Questions

1. Which particular reference group has the most dominant influence on young adult consumers' attitudes toward luxury brand segments?
2. Which particular reference group has the most dominant influence on the materialistic attitude of young adults towards luxury brands?

RESEARCH DESIGN

The study used a descriptive research design to accurately describe the things that happen when reference groups affect how young adults feel about luxury companies. Descriptive design is best for impact-based studies that are not experimental. This research approach made it possible to look closely at how teens think and act, using detailed data on how different sorts of reference groups affect them and how materialism is linked to the different types of reference groups. Descriptive research does a decent job of studying a demographic data by showing how age, gender, and type of reference group affected people's perceptions toward luxury products. The goal of this research design was to give a complete picture of the relationship between reference groups and young adults' attitudes toward buying luxury product segments.

METHODOLOGY

A quantitative method was adopted to answer the key research questions, to collect data and test the key hypotheses. The methodology involved gathering and evaluating numerical data. It was especially useful to evaluate causal linkages, make predictions, identify trends and averages, and extrapolate findings to larger populations.

This methodology allowed for measurement of data, statistical analysis of the same, and test the relationships between dependent and independent variables, which were reference groups and attitude respectively. To obtain data from a group of adolescents, the study used a cross-sectional survey that was administered to young adult respondents. A structured questionnaire with survey items that made use of Likert Scale allowed for the quantification of the attitude dimensions of young adults towards Luxury brands influenced by the two different reference groups.

Sampling

This research made use of convenience sampling, a kind of non-probability sampling. As to obtain data from 200 young adults, 100 boys, and 100 girls, from a large demographic section can be challenging. A convenience sample is made up of volunteers who are less challenging for the researcher to find and who are willing to participate in the study. This allows the study to save time and be quite cost-effective. Considering the researcher is an academician, it was more convenient for the research to adopt convenience sampling as it helped in obtaining a representative sample of young adults influenced by different kinds of reference groups. The convenience sampling adopted in this study may not provide a statistically representative sample of the adolescent universe; however, it is helpful for exploratory studies. A sample size of 200 was considered to be sufficient for investigating the influence of reference groups on consumer attitudes within this specific age demographic.

Questionnaire Sections and Measures

The survey tool was made to find out how different reference groups affect how people feel about

materialism and luxury brands. The study framework's conceptual elements were used to group the questionnaire into theme sections. There were both Likert-scale and categorical items in each segment, and the constructs were measured using items that had been altered or plainly written from the original items.

Reference Group Influence

This part was meant to understand how different sorts of reference groups, like celebrities, aspirational groups, and online communities, affected the views and choices of the people who answered. The following items were included:

"I often appreciate the way people I look up to live and try to imitate their lifestyle."

"To what extent do your close friends influence your product choices or brand preferences?"

"Which of the following has the biggest influence on your brand choices?

"Please rate the influence of the following groups on your lifestyle and brand preferences"

These items were used to help people tell the difference between aspirational reference groups, close or normative groups, celebrity influence, and digital or online reference groups. We utilized a 5-point Likert scale to obtain replies, except for the question about the main influence category.

Attitude Toward Luxury Brands

This section examined perceptions of luxury brands and the alignment of these perceptions with materialistic values. It had:

"Rate the extent to which you associate luxury brands with success, status, or social approval."

Materialism Orientation

We utilized the following item to find out how the respondents' materialistic values were linked to their aspirational goals:

"Owning high-end products is a reflection of my success and aspirations in life."

Demographic and Classification Variables

The last part of the questionnaire asked for demographic information, such as age, gender, level of education, and how often people use social media. This information was used for subgroup analysis.

DATA & ANALYSIS

The study used paired-sample t-tests to compare the mean scores of three pairs of reference groups: aspirational vs. normative, close friends vs. celebrities, and family friends vs. online groups. This was done to test the first hypothesis about how different types of reference groups had different levels of influence. These tests helped figure out if the variations in perceived impact were statistically significant. For the second hypothesis, which looked at the link between reference group influence and materialism, Spearman's rank-order correlation was used because the data were not parametric. We also used the Chi-square goodness-of-fit and Mann-Whitney U tests to answer the research questions about dominating reference groups and how they affect materialistic views. The chi-square test looked at whether celebrities or friends and family were more often seen as dominant influencers, and the Mann-Whitney U test looked at whether materialistic views were very different between these two groups. Together, these statistical tools made it possible to do a thorough examination of both group differences and relational patterns in the data. This helped us understand how social influence affects materialistic ideals.

Test Results of the First Hypothesis

T-Test

Paired Samples Statistics					
		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Aspirational Reference Group Influence	2.64	200	.821	.058
	Normative Reference Group Influence	3.06	200	.970	.069
Pair 2	Influence of Close Friends	2.88	200	1.035	.073
	Influence of Celebrities	2.96	200	1.168	.083
Pair 3	Influence of Family Friends	2.72	200	1.253	.089
	Influence of Online Groups or Forums	1.86	200	1.252	.089

Paired Samples Correlations				
		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Aspirational Reference Group Influence & Normative Reference Group Influence	200	-.301	.000
Pair 2	Influence of Close Friends & Influence of Celebrities	200	-.154	.030
Pair 3	Influence of Family Friends & Influence of Online Groups or Forums	200	-.128	.072

Paired Samples Test												
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)			
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
					Lower	Upper						
Pair 1	Aspirational Reference Group Influence - Normative Reference Group Influence	-.420	1.447	.102	-.622	-.218	-4.105	199	.000			
Pair 2	Influence of Close Friends - Influence of Celebrities	-.080	1.676	.118	-.314	.154	-.675	199	.500			
Pair 3	Influence of Family Friends - Influence of Online Groups or Forums	.860	1.881	.133	.598	1.122	6.466	199	.000			

Variables Paired for Comparison:

Pair I
Aspirational Reference Group Influence vs Normative Reference Group Influence
Pair II
Influence of Close Friends vs Influence of Celebrities
Pair III
Influence of Family Friends vs Influence of Online Groups or Forums

Key Results and Interpretation

Pair 1: Aspirational vs Normative Reference Group Influence

Mean Difference: -0.420

t-value: -4.105

p-value (Sig. 2-tailed): 0.000 (Statistically significant)

Interpretation:

The aspirational reference group had significantly less influence than normative reference groups (e.g., family, peers who set expectations).

Pair 2: Influence of Close Friends vs Celebrities

Mean Difference: -0.080

t-value: -0.675

p-value: 0.500 (Not significant)

Interpretation:

There is no statistically significant difference in the influence of close friends compared to celebrities..

Pair 3: Family Friends vs Online Groups/Forums

Mean Difference: 0.860

t-value: 6.466

p-value: 0.000 (Statistically significant)

Interpretation:

Family friends have significantly more influence than online groups or forums.

Test results of the second hypothesis**Nonparametric Correlations**

Correlations				
			Aspirational Reference Group Influence	Materialism and Aspirational Value Link
Spearman's rho	Aspirational Reference Group Influence	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.119
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.093
		N	200	200
	Materialism and Aspirational Value Link	Correlation Coefficient	.119	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.093	.
		N	200	200

Interpretation:**1. Correlation Coefficient ($p = 0.119$)**

This is a positive correlation, as aspirational reference group influence increases, there is a slight increase in materialistic attitudes related to aspiration.

However, 0.119 is quite a weak correlation (barely above the threshold of 0.10).

2. Significance Level ($p = 0.093$)

The p-value is 0.093, which is greater than 0.05.

Hence, the correlation is not statistically significant at the 5% level.

Correlations				
			Normative Reference Group Influence	Impact of Materialism on Attitude
Spearman's rho	Normative Reference Group Influence	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.123
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.082
		N	200	200
	Impact of Materialism on Attitude	Correlation Coefficient	.123	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.082	.
		N	200	200

Interpretation:**1. Correlation Coefficient ($p = 0.123$)**

The correlation is positive, indicating that as normative group influence increases, so does the impact of materialism on the participant's attitude.

However, the strength of the correlation is still very weak.

2. Significance ($p = 0.082$)

The p-value is greater than 0.05, so the result is not statistically significant at the conventional threshold. This means there's not enough proof to confidently claim a real association in the population, despite the trend in your sample.

In general, while both aspirational and normative influences show positive directional relationships with materialistic orientation, the findings lack statistical significance, and therefore do not offer enough statistical evidence for the hypothesis that reference group influence is significantly correlated with materialism in this sample.

First Research Question

Dominant Reference Group			
	Observed N	Expected N	Residual

Friends and family	96	100.0	-4.0
Celebrities	104	100.0	4.0
Total	200		

Test Statistics	
	Dominant Reference Group
Chi-Square	.320 ^a
df	1
Asymp. Sig.	.572
a. 0 cells (0.0%) have expected frequencies less than 5. The minimum expected cell frequency is 100.0.	

Despite the difference **not being statistically significant** ($p = 0.572$), **Celebrities** had a **higher count (104 vs. 96)**. While the difference was not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 0.320$, $p = 0.572$), **Celebrities** emerged as the **numerically dominant influence** on respondents' attitudes toward luxury brands, with 104 out of 200 selecting them, compared to 96 who chose Friends & Family.

Second Research Question

		Ranks		
		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Impact of Materialism on Attitude	Friends and family	96	90.54	8692.00
	Celebrities	104	109.69	11408.00
	Total	200		

Higher rank = higher score on the dependent variable.

Since **Celebrities (109.69) > Friends (90.54)** → respondents influenced by celebrities tend to score higher on "Impact of Materialism on Attitude".

Test Statistics ^a	
	Impact of Materialism on Attitude
Mann-Whitney U	4036.000
Wilcoxon W	8692.000
Z	-2.413
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.016
a. Grouping Variable: Dominant Reference Group	

Test Statistics

Mann-Whitney U = 4036.000

Z = -2.413

p-value (Asymp. Sig. 2-tailed) = .016

Statistical Significance

$p = .016 < .05$ → statistically significant difference between the two groups.

Respondents who consider celebrities their dominant reference group show a significantly higher materialistic influence on their attitudes toward luxury brands than those influenced by friends and family.

(Mann-Whitney U = 4036.00, Z = -2.413, p = .016)

FINDINGS

The study looked at how different reference groups affect how people feel about things, focusing on how they feel about materialism and luxury brands. To test the first hypothesis, a paired-sample t-test was used to look at how different combinations of reference group impacts affected the results. The results showed that normative reference groups, such family and friends who establish standards for behavior, had a much bigger effect on the people who answered than aspirational reference groups. The mean difference was -0.420 and the p-value was .000. This means that people are more impacted by the people they see and talk to every day who establish standards for behavior than by the people they want to be like.

On the other hand, there was no big difference in how close friends and celebrities affected people. The average difference was quite small (-0.080), and the p-value of .500 showed that it was not statistically significant. This means that, according to the people who answered, close friends and celebrities have about the same amount of power when it comes to changing people's opinions about consuming. There was, however, a big contrast between family friends and internet forums or groups. Family friends had a far bigger effect, with a mean difference of 0.860 and a p-value of .000. This proves that in-person networks are more powerful online communities when it comes to determining how people spend their financial resources.

To test the second hypothesis, the study made use of nonparametric Spearman's rho correlations to investigate the relation between reference group influence and materialistic disposition. There were not so strong positive correlations in both cases: 0.119 for aspirational reference group influence and 0.123 for normative reference group influence. But these correlations were not found to be statistically significant, with p-values of .093 and .082, respectively. These results displayed a minor inclination in one manner, but they don't have enough statistical evidence to show that there is an actual, real relationship between the influence of reference groups and materialistic attitudes of respondents. The study made use of a chi-square goodness-of-fit test to answer the first research question on how the dominating reference group impacts the attitude of young adults towards luxury brands. There was a marginally higher number of respondents (104 out of 200) who stated that celebrities were their main influence than friends and family (96), but the difference was statistically insignificant ($\chi^2 = 0.320$, $p = .572$). Notwithstanding, celebrities were found to be the largest group, statistically, however, inconclusive. The second research question investigated whether the dominant reference group was related to differences in materialistic attitudes towards luxury brands. A Mann-Whitney U test proved that respondents who stated celebrities were their main reference group influence scored far higher on materialism than respondents who stated friends and family were their main reference group. The average rank for the celebrity group was 109.69, while the average rank for the friends and family group was 90.54. The p-value was .016, which means the difference was statistically significant. This result implies that celebrities may not be the most common, but they do have a bigger effect on how materialism affects how people think about things.

To summarise briefly, the study proves that normative reference groups have a more significant impact than aspirational ones, and that normative groups are more powerful than anonymous digital groups. However, neither kind of reference group has substantial relationship to the trait of materialism. In spite of statistical significance, those who find celebrities as their key source of inspiration are likely to be more materialistic in their attitude. This proves that celebrity culture may impact how people spend their money in several ways.

FUTURE SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The current study focussed on how different reference groups impact materialistic attitudes of young adults in various ways. Future studies could focus on how these dynamics change across demographic factors like age, gender, income level, or geographic location to find potential mediating variables. The impact of social media personalities and influencers, particularly, on younger require further research as the current study focussed on "celebrities" as a broader group. Longitudinal studies could potentially be used to understand how influence of reference groups over time or in response to changes in lifestyle and socioeconomic status.

Additionally, future studies can adopt qualitative techniques like in-depth interviews or focus group discussions to investigate the psychological factors that cause these effects that could be interested in depth. With the addition of experimental designs, you could obtain results that could have greater applications and utility. Beyond it, addition of colleagues, teachers/professors, or subcultural groups (such fandom communities) to the reference group categories may provide a more comprehensive picture of how social influence impacts materialism and consumer attitude in diverse scenarios.

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