

# Gender Differences In Susceptibility To Normative Social Influence On The Purchase Decisions Of Designer Label Apparel

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## ABSTRACT

*This study examines susceptibility to normative social influence on purchase decisions of designer label apparel in Malaysia. The study focuses on the youth market with special consideration given to gender differences. Influences of family and peers were examined along with celebrity influences. A total of 319 youth participated in the study. Results indicate that gender differences do exist with males exhibiting a higher likelihood of being influenced by their reference groups. Celebrity influence was also found to be weaker than that exerted by direct reference groups.*

**Keywords:** Designer label apparel, gender differences, normative influence, Malaysia.

## INTRODUCTION

Globally the youth market has evolved into a brand-oriented and materialistic society. For instance, Americans under the age of 25 spend 5 times more money than their parents did at that age (Ewold, 2003). In a similar fashion, the Asian society too has become brand conscious and is particularly prominent among the youth and in Malaysia, this market comprises generally of college and university students and young working adults. This lucrative segment makes up approximately 20% of the total population ([www.statistics.gov.com](http://www.statistics.gov.com)) and is expansively seen as sporting designer label apparel (DLA). In Malaysia the apparel industry has undergone great transformation with more and more brands entering the market, and the recent past years have seen the entry of numerous international brands. The apparel industry is worth RM 3.26 billion (approximately USD 1.1 billion) (Protégé Associates' Independent Market Report (2007).

The current study examines gender differences in susceptibility to reference group influence, in particular normative social influence on the purchase decisions for designer label apparel. The study is deemed timely as most previous studies have been carried out in the US (e.g. Martin and Bush, 2000; Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Feltham, 1998) and research done in Malaysia is scarce. The next section reviews relevant literature followed by the research objectives, methodology, analysis and discussion. Limitations of the study are also highlighted.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A reference group is defined as “a group of people that significantly influence an individual’s behaviour” (Bearden and Etzel, 1982, p.184). In the consumer behaviour context, reference groups typically comprise of families, friends, co-workers and other leisure groups (Peter and Olson, 1999). These are generally referred to as direct reference groups (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1994). On the other hand, indirect reference groups comprise of inspirational groups that influence consumers’ purchase intentions without having any direct contact such as celebrities, sports personalities, etc.

Reference group influence has been conceptualised as a multidimensional construct (Grimm, Agrawal and Richardson, 1999). The two most widely accepted influences are informative and normative social influence. Normative social influence refers to the tendency to conform to the expectations of others. For instance an individual's purchase or use of a brand may stem from a desire to be admired by his peers or to identify with the norms of a much admired group. Informational social influence on the other hand refers to the tendency to accept information from others as evidence of reality (Deutsche and Gerard, 1955). Referents may provide new information, which is perceived as instrumental to the solution of a problem, or reinforce established beliefs.

Previous research shows that group influences play an important role in influencing the purchase decisions and patterns of consumption (Brinberg and Plimpton, 1986; Martin and Bush, 2000; Mascarenhas and Higby, 1993). For instance reference groups have been found to specify desirable versus undesirable goods (Bristol and Mangleburg, 2005). Studies have documented several determinants of reference group influence such as credibility, attractiveness and expertise of the reference group (e.g. Kamins, 1989; Ohanian, 1990), product conspicuousness (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Brinberg and Plimpton, 1986). It has been suggested that individuals are more susceptible to reference group influence when the product is conspicuous and publicly consumed (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Makgosa and Mohube, 2007) such as fashion apparel and accessories. In fact, reference groups may influence not only product but also brand choice. Studies have also been conducted to determine the relationship between product conspicuousness and buying motives, e.g. Grimm, et al (1999) concluded that normative social influence is dominant when buying motives are affective in nature, regardless of product conspicuousness.

## **GENDER DIFFERENCES**

Gender has been and continues to be one of the most common bases of segmentation, as it is easily identifiable, easy to access and large enough to be profitable (Myers-Levy and Sternthal, 1991). Previous research has demonstrated that the purchase behaviour of males and females differs in many ways. For example, females have been found to be more sensitive to the informative details provided in advertisements (Auty and Elliot, 1998), or in the way information is processed (Laroche et al, 2000). Females place greater value on promoting and maintaining relationships. They are highly conscious and concerned with promoting interpersonal harmony (Rosenberg and Simmons, 1975). Females tend to discuss consumption matters with peers, such as information search, purchase decisions and brand preferences more frequently than males (Mangleburg et al. 1997; Moschis and Mitchell 1986).

With particular reference to susceptibility to interpersonal influence, females have been found to be more susceptible to the display aspects of clothing i.e. value-expressive influence, whereas males were more influenced by utilitarian aspects of the same (Rose, Boush and Friestad, 1998). Differences have also been observed with respect to parental influence. For instance, females have in the past demonstrated a higher degree of parental influence as compared to males (Feltham, 1998). In addition, gender differences have also been observed with respect to friends, siblings and media influence (Wilson and MacGillivray, 1998).

## **CELEBRITY INFLUENCES**

Kamins (1989) defined celebrities as "individuals who are well known to the public for their advertisements in areas other than product class endorsed" and that they represent "an idealisation of life"(Schiffman et al,1995). As such, they have widely been used in endorsing products or giving testimonials in advertisements. Past research indicates that celebrities exert influence on consumers purchase intentions and decisions (Martin and Bush, 2000; Daneshvary and Schwer, 2000). Consumers have also reported to buying a product due to celebrity endorsement as well as physical attractiveness (Ohanian, 1991). Celebrities have also been found to enhance persuasiveness of messages and lead to actual purchases (Ohanian, 1990).

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

Clothing is one of the most noticeable icons of the youth culture and is an important means by which they express their identity and gain social approval. It also reflects individual status, image and style, therefore it can be

presumed that reference groups may play a significant role in providing relevant information, deemed necessary to make a purchase and conform to group norms. Additionally, as clothing is visible it is likely to be purchased with a reference group in mind (Schiffman and Kanuk, 2000). In addition, as mentioned earlier, most of the existing literature is based on studies conducted in the West and research conducted in the Malaysian context is scarce, this study is deemed timely. Hence, the primary objective of the study is:

- To identify gender differences in susceptibility to normative social influence in the purchase decisions of designer label apparel among the youth of Malaysia.

**SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGY**

This study was designed to compare directly which of the major influences exerts normative influence on the youth’s decision to purchasing designer label apparel. Special attention was given to gender differences. A convenience sample of students from two institutions of higher learning was recruited for the study. A total of 1200 self-administered questionnaires were distributed of which 328 were returned giving a response rate of 26.6%. Nine were rejected during the screening process as the respondents indicated that they did not purchase designer label apparel. The total usable sample was 319 of which 102 were males and 217 were females. (For a demographic profile refer to Table 1)

Four sources covering both direct and indirect reference groups were analysed for seven issues pertaining to susceptibility to normative influence. The five issues that examined the influence of direct reference groups included; frequency of shopping with group members; brand decisions made by group members; brands purchased because group members purchased them; brands purchased to be accepted by group members and brands purchased to identify with group members. The three reference groups utilised for this study are parents, peers and siblings. The last two issues examined celebrity influence on the purchase decisions for designer label apparel. The issues examined were image enhancement and identification with the celebrity endorser. A five point Likert scale was used to determine normative influence.

**ANALYSIS**

Consistent with Wilson and MacGillivray’s (1998) study of self-perceived influence of family, friends and media on adolescent clothing choice, Chi-square tests were performed to test the relationship between sources of normative influence and gender.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile**

Characteristics	Number	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	102	32
Female	217	68
<b>Age</b>		
18-20	188	58.9
21-23	131	41.1
<b>Income</b>		
Less than RM1000	259	81.7
Between RM1000 and RM2000	53	16.7
More than RM2000	5	1.6
<b>Occupation</b>		
Student	303	90.4
Working full time	17	5.1
Working part time	15	4.5

**Frequency of shopping with group members** – Table 2 provides the results of the analysis for the frequency of shopping with parents, friends and siblings. For all the three influences examined, Chi-square test revealed significant differences between the genders. This shows that gender does have an influence. For the first group i.e. parents, 29% of males reported as “Always” shop with parents as compared to only 13% females, and 43.4% females reported as “Rarely” shop with parents as compared to 31% males. With respect to friends, a significant 34.7% males reported as “Rarely” shop with friends as compared to 43.9% females. With respect to siblings, 26.3% males reported as “Always” shop with siblings as compared to only 12.2% females. Furthermore, only 5.1% males reported as “Never” shop with friends as compared to 21.3% females. It could be suggested that as males, rather than females, tend to shop for designer label apparel more frequently with their parents and siblings, this could have an influence on other factors, such as brand decisions.

**Table 2: Frequency of shopping with group members**

	Parents				Friends				Siblings			
	A	S	R	N	A	S	R	N	A	S	R	N
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	29.0	28.0	31.0	12.0	7.9	11.9	34.7	45.5	26.3	23.2	45.5	5.1
<b>Female</b>	13.7	23.9	43.4	19.0	2.0	9.3	43.9	44.9	12.2	25.9	40.6	21.3
$\chi^2$	Test Value 13.528 at p= 0.004				Test value 8.028 at p=0.045				Test value 19.268 at p=0.000			

A= Always, S= Sometimes, R= Rarely, N= Never

**Brands decision by group members** – Table 3 provides the results of the analyses for brand decisions made by group members. For all the three influences examined, Chi-square tests revealed only one to be significant. No differences between the genders for parents and friends were observed. The analysis shows that although gender differences do not exist, friends exert significant normative influence. Most of the frequencies recorded were positive. For instance, 37.6% males and 35.1 females reported as “Strongly Agree” to allowing friends to make brand decisions for them as compared to 10.9% males and 6.8% females who reported as ‘Strongly Disagree’ to this statement.

In contrast, parental influence is not as strong as most of the frequencies recorded are negative or neutral. For instance 32.7% males and 38% females reported as “Neither agree nor disagree” to allowing parents to make brand decisions.

Chi-square tests for siblings revealed significant differences between the genders. For instance, 20% males as compared to 8.8% females reported as “Strongly Disagreeing” to allowing this group to make brand decisions and 36% males reported as “agree” compared to only 27.8% females.

**Table 3: Brand decision by group members**

	Parents					Friends					Siblings				
	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	18.8	24.8	32.7	15.8	7.9	10.9	10.9	26.7	37.6	13.9	20.0	15.0	25.0	36.0	4.0
<b>Female</b>	14.1	21.0	38.0	21.5	5.4	6.8	11.7	36.1	35.1	10.2	8.8	17.0	40.2	27.8	6.2
$\chi^2$	Test value 3.714 at p=0.446					Test value 4.096 at p=0.393					Test value at 13.155 at p=0.011				

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

**Purchase brands in order to be like group members** - Table 4 provides the results of analyses of purchase of branded clothes because group members purchased them. For the all the three influences examined, Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in two out of three. This shows that gender does have an influence. For the first group i.e. parents, Chi-square tests did not reveal any significant differences. For instance, 31.7% males and

30.7% females reported as “neither agreeing nor disagreeing” and only 1% males and 1% females reported to as “strongly agreeing” to purchasing brands to be like their parents.

Chi-square tests for both friends and siblings were significant. For instance, with respect to the peer group influence 17.4% males reported as strongly agreeing as compared to only 7.4% females. Finally, with respect to sibling influence, 22.6% females reported to “disagree” as compared to only 16% males.

**Table 4: Purchase brands in order to be like group members (because group members purchase them)**

	Parents					Friends					Siblings				
	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	27.7	25.7	31.7	13.9	1.0	8.9	11.9	24.8	36.6	17.8	20.0	16.0	27.0	29.0	8.0
<b>Female</b>	23.9	29.8	30.7	14.6	1.0	6.9	17.6	35.8	32.4	7.4	10.3	22.6	35.4	25.1	6.7
$\chi^2$	Test value 0.824 at p=0.935					Test value 11.571 at p=0.021					Test value 7.996 at p=0.092				

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

**Purchase brands to be accepted by group members** - Table 5 provides the results of the analyses for brand decisions made to be accepted by group members. For all the three influences examined, Chi-square tests revealed significant differences in one out of three. For the first influence i.e. parents’ influence, Chi-square tests did not reveal any significant differences between the genders. Most of the responses recorded were unfavourable, indicating that the purchase of branded apparel is not motivated by the desire to be accepted by their parents. Similarly, no significant differences were found between the genders for sibling influence.

However, with respect to friends, chi-square tests revealed significant differences. For instance, 32.7% males reported to “agree” to purchasing branded apparel to be accepted by peers as compared to only 7.4% females. Similarly only 13.9% males reported to “disagree” to this statement as compared to 25% females.

**Table 5: Brand purchased to be accepted by group members**

	Parents					Friends					Siblings				
	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	29.7	23.8	25.7	18.8	2.0	16.8	13.9	19.8	32.7	16.8	23.0	21.0	27.0	24.0	5.0
<b>Female</b>	27.3	31.7	27.8	11.2	2.0	16.2	25.0	28.4	23.0	7.4	20.5	27.7	31.8	16.9	3.1
$\chi^2$	Test value 4.554 at p=0.336					Test value 14.093 at p=0.007					Test value 4.229 at p= 0.376				

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

**Purchase brands to identify with group members** - Table 6 provides the analyses for purchasing branded apparel to identify with the group members. For all the three influences examined, chi-square tests revealed significant differences in one out of three. For the first source i.e. parents, Chi-square tests did not reveal any significant differences between the genders. For instance 27.7% males and 27.5% females reported as “strongly disagree” to purchasing branded apparel to identify with their parents. Similarly, no significant differences between the genders were observed for siblings. For instance, 22% males and 21.1% females reported as “strongly disagree” to purchasing branded apparel to identify with their siblings.

However, with respect to friends, Chi-square tests revealed significant differences between genders. For instance 10.9% males reported to “disagree” as compared to 22.4% females and 11.9% males reported to “strongly agree” as compared to only 6.3% females. Based on the analyses, of all the three influences, friends exert the strongest influence. As such, the youth is highly motivated to purchase branded apparel to identify with them.

**Table 6: Brand purchased to identify with group members**

	Parents					Friends					Siblings				
	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Male</b>	27.7	26.7	25.7	19.8	0.0	16.8	10.9	24.8	35.6	11.9	22.0	16.0	33.0	27.0	2.0
<b>Female</b>	27.5	29.4	31.9	10.8	0.5	14.1	22.4	26.3	30.7	6.3	21.1	25.3	28.9	21.6	3.1
$\chi^2$	Test value 5.054 at p=0.239					Test value 8.281 at p=0.082					Test value 4.048 at p=0.400				

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

**Celebrity influence** - Table 7 provides the results of the analyses for celebrity influence on the purchase decisions for DLA. Two issues were examined in this section, firstly effects of celebrity endorsement on image enhancement and secondly identification with the celebrity endorser.

**Image enhancement and Celebrity endorsement** - Chi-square analyses for influence of celebrity endorsement did not reveal any significant differences between the genders. This shows that gender does not have an influence. Responses recorded ranged mostly from “strongly disagree” to “Agree”. For instance, 31.7% males and 30.7% females reported as “Agree” to purchasing DLA to enhance their image because it was endorsed by a celebrity, and only 2% males and 1.5% females reported as “Strongly agree” to this reference group influence. 28.7% males and 34.1% females reported a neutral influence by celebrity endorsers.

**Purchase Designer Label Apparel to identify with celebrity** - Chi-square analyses performed revealed no significant differences between the genders. Frequencies of responses recorded ranged between “Strongly disagree” to “Agree”. Most of the responses recorded were negative For instance, 22.8% males and 19.5% females reported as “Strongly disagreeing” to purchasing a celebrity DLA to identify with the celebrity endorser as compared to only 1% males and 1% females who reported as “Strongly agree” to this statement.

Findings for both these issues is contrary to expectations, as past research has indicated that celebrity endorsement does influence both purchase intentions and decisions (Daneshvary and Schwer, 2000; Martin and Bush 2000) as well as actual purchase (Ohanian 1991). It could, however, be inferred that the issue examined was very general in nature. Perhaps the use of a specific celebrity or celebrities may have yielded different results.

**Table 7 Celebrity Influence**

Effect of celebrity endorsement on enhancing image					
	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%
Male	15.8	21.8	28.7	31.7	2.0
Female	6.8	26.8	34.1	30.7	1.5
$\chi^2$	Test value 7.038 at p=0.134				
Purchase DLA to identify with celebrity endorser					
	SD	D	N	A	SA
	%	%	%	%	%
Male	22.8	25.7	34.7	15.8	1.0
Female	19.5	35.6	31.2	12.7	1.0
$\chi^2$	Test value 3.124 at p=0.537				

SD=Strongly Disagree, D=Disagree, N=Neither Agree Nor Disagree, A=Agree, SA=Strongly Agree

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Findings of the current study suggest that susceptibility to normative social influence is dependent on the gender of the consumer. Some findings however, are not consistent with earlier studies. For example, with respect to

parents it appears that males might be more influenced by their parents as they tend to shop for designer label apparel more frequently with these groups than their female counterparts. No significant differences were noted between the genders where influence by parents and friends on brand decisions was concerned. This finding does not support Feltham (1998) who reported that females have demonstrated a higher degree of parental influence as compared to males. It was, however, found that males and females differ significantly where sibling influence on brand choice was concerned. This also makes this finding partially in agreement with Wilson and MacGillivray (1998).

The results of this study also indicate that friends and siblings play a larger role in influencing brand decisions compared to parents where certain brands were purchased because group members purchased the same brands. This finding relating to reference group influence appears to be consistent with earlier research (Bearden and Etzel, 1982; Makgosa and Mohube, 2007) who suggested that individuals are more susceptible to reference group influence when the product is conspicuous and publicly consumed such as fashion apparel and accessories. Further, this finding also suggested gender differences. Males are more likely to purchase brands because their group members, especially friends, purchase the same brands.

Another important area where gender differences were noted was the desire to purchase certain brands in order to be accepted by group members. The finding suggests that males, rather than females, are more likely to purchase designer label brands to be accepted by their friends. This contradicts earlier findings by Rose et al (1998) who found that females tend to be more susceptible to value-expressive aspects of clothing compared to males. It is also interesting to note that of all the three direct reference groups, friends tend to exert the greatest influence where individuals purchase brands because they identify themselves with their peers. Further, it appears that males are more likely to purchase designer apparel than females because they identify themselves with their friends. This finding is, again, inconsistent with Rose et al (1998).

It is somewhat surprising that celebrity influence on purchasing decisions of designer label apparel to enhance one's image or because individuals identify with the celebrities, was found to be weak. This is not consistent with earlier findings of Martin and Bush (2000) and Daneshvary and Schwer (2000). Perhaps the use of a specific celebrity or celebrities may have yielded a different result.

Friends continue to be a dominant normative reference group. This is hardly surprising as the youth is concerned with self-expression and gaining social approval. The findings are consistent with Wilson and MacGillivray (1998), who reported that friends play a dominant role in the clothing choice of young adults. On the whole, it appears that males are likely to be more influenced by their reference groups, especially friends, when making decisions relating to designer label apparel. The findings have important implications for marketers, particularly for advertisers. In developing advertising messages, for instance, advertisers must not overlook the role of friends and siblings, especially when the target audience comprises of males.

As with most studies, this study is not without limitations. Since the study was conducted in the urban areas of Kuala Lumpur with the sample taken from students of two higher education institutions, the sample can hardly be a representative of Malaysian youth. In addition, although chi-square tests reveal that differences do exist, they do not indicate the strength of the difference. It is therefore, recommended that future studies incorporate youth from other cities and towns of Malaysia as well. In addition, other product categories such as the youth icons of cell phones and other electronic gadgets, which are conspicuous products and may be perceived as a status symbol, should also be examined. In addition, studies pertaining to specific celebrity endorsements that may have an influence on brand choice should also be carried out.

#### **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

**Ghazala Khan** is a lecturer in the School of Business, Monash University Malaysia. She has been attached to the tertiary education for the last 14 years. She has also won two teaching awards in 2005 and 2006. Her research interests include consumer behaviour particularly family decision making and the youth market. Her research has previously been published in the Business review, Cambridge and several papers in international conference

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**Naila Khan** is a lecturer in the School of Business and Marketing of the University College Birmingham, UK. She has lived and worked in a number of countries including Malaysia. Her research interests include consumer behaviour especially reference groups and cultural influences on consumer decision making. Her research has previously been published in *The Business Review*, Cambridge. Besides her subject related research interests, she is also currently pursuing research related to teaching and learning and is especially interested in the learning experiences of international students in the UK.

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**NOTES**