



Understanding Psycho-Social Drivers Brand Sensitivity Among Adolescents

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Abstract

This research was carried out to explore the level of brand sensitivity among adolescents studying in schools belonging to lower, middle, and higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Brand sensitivity is considered a psychological factor that influences how consumers make purchasing choices and decisions. The study was conducted in the Gujrat district and employed a quantitative approach. Since the target population was school-going children, purposive sampling was adopted as the most appropriate technique. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire survey. For better understanding, the scale was translated into Urdu and initially tested on 15 students at Jinnah Public School, Gujrat. To assess the impact of peer influence on adolescents, the *Susceptibility to Reference Group Influence* scale, originally developed by Netemeyer and Teel, was adapted into Urdu. In collaboration with schools, the researchers selected 30 students (15 boys and 15 girls) from each institution using convenient sampling. Those who consented to participate were asked to complete a pencil-and-paper questionnaire administered by the researcher. All participants were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The results revealed a clear link between brand sensitivity and peer group influence. Correlation analysis confirmed a significant relationship between the dependent and independent variables. Moreover, the findings were consistent with the earlier study of Creekmore et al. (1980), which reported that adolescents who conformed to socially accepted dress codes were more readily accepted by their peers compared to those who displayed individuality through their clothing choices.

Keywords: Brand Sensitivity, Social, Psychological, School, Adolescence, Brand Conscious

Introduction

The term *adolescence* comes from the Latin word *adolescere*, which means “to grow up” or “to reach maturity” (Phillip, n.d.). This stage of life is marked by rapid physical, emotional, and psychological changes that take young people from childhood into early adulthood. During this transition, adolescents become more self-aware and self-conscious (Santrock, 1998). Erikson (1968) explained that the central task of this period is to form an independent identity, one that is not solely tied to parental influence. In shaping this identity, adolescents look toward different reference groups around them. Family and peers are the two most important of these groups. Families often guide decisions related to education, finances, and career paths, while peers play a stronger role in shaping choices about friendships, clothing styles, and participation in social events (Phillip, n.d.). Clothes, in particular, hold powerful symbolic meaning during adolescence,

functioning as tools of social interaction and self-expression (Kaiser, 1990; Shim & Koh, 1997). Studies show that teenagers who follow accepted dress codes are more likely to be welcomed by their peer groups than those who try to express individuality through unique clothing styles (Creekmore, 1980). This highlights how clothing decisions in adolescence carry social, psychological, and even economic risks. For many teenagers, what they wear is not only a way to gain peer acceptance but also a means of building healthy self-esteem (Daters, 1990). Research consistently shows that adolescents who conform to clothing norms are more likely to be socially recognized compared to those who emphasize their individuality (Creekmore, 1980). Clothing has been found to influence how others perceive and behave toward individuals (Lefkowitz, Blake, & Mouton, 1955; Bickman, 1971; Darley & Cooper, 1972). Over the past few decades, adolescents' interest in branded fashion has grown significantly (O'Neil, 1998). Those who frequently discuss purchasing decisions with their peers often develop stronger brand consciousness (Shim & Koh, 1997). This suggests a close connection between peer influence and sensitivity to clothing brands. Supporting this view, Lachance et al. (2003) examined the role of parents, peers, and media in shaping brand sensitivity. They found that peer encouragement was the strongest predictor of brand awareness and influence, while media had little direct effect. In this light, the present study has been designed to assess the level of brand sensitivity among adolescents from schools representing lower, middle, and higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Review of Literature

Over the years, many studies have examined how brand sensitivity develops among students across different contexts. Erikson (1968) argued that the central task of adolescence is the search for an identity that is separate from parental influence. This process often stretches from early adolescence into young adulthood and is marked by a constant struggle for independence. At the heart of this struggle, it is natural for teenagers to become more self-conscious and self-absorbed. One way they negotiate this process is by turning to peers, who provide a platform to shape identities that feel separate from their parents. However, this reliance on peers can also heighten self-awareness and self-consciousness. Research shows that susceptibility to peer influence peaks in pre-adolescence and then gradually declines through the high school years. For instance, when faced with peer suggestions whether prosocial or antisocial adolescents are often more likely than younger children to follow their peers' lead. They also tend to view peers as more important role models compared to children in earlier stages of development (Keiser & Stephen K., 1975). As adolescence progresses, the amount of unsupervised time spent with peers increases, while time with parents and other adults decreases significantly. This deep social immersion strengthens peer influence, often resulting in heightened self-awareness, particularly among girls (Rankin et al., 2000). Adolescence is, therefore, a stage filled with self-doubt and heightened self-consciousness. At the same time, brand consciousness rises, reflecting the idea that teenagers often use brands to present a desirable image to others and to boost their sense of self-worth (Shim & Koh, 1997). Laurent and Kapferer (1983) defined brand sensitivity as a psychological construct that shapes how consumers make purchasing decisions. When consumers are brand sensitive, brand reputation becomes a major factor in their choices (Kapferer & Laurent, 1992). For example, individuals who are more concerned with achievement or appearance are often particularly responsive to high-status or designer brands. Gender also plays a role, with studies showing that women generally display higher levels of brand sensitivity than men (Beaudoin & Lachance, 2006). Kapferer (1991) further suggested that consumers may be especially sensitive to brands in certain product categories, and this sensitivity depends on factors such as personal interest in the category, the desire to create a particular self-image, and the risks involved in making a purchase (Kapferer & Laurent, 1983). Beaudoin et al. (2003) examined brand sensitivity across five types of fashion adopters and found that trendsetters showed the highest levels, while late adopters showed the

least. Later, Beaudoin and Lachance (2006) confirmed that fashion innovativeness is a key driver of brand sensitivity, with women again showing stronger patterns than men. Other variables such as peer influence, consumer knowledge, and self-esteem were also found to be closely connected with brand sensitivity. A review of existing literature on adolescents, clothing, and peer influence makes it clear that brand sensitivity is an important area of study for understanding young people's interest in branded clothing. Lachance et al. (2003) analyzed the influence of parents, peers, and media on brand sensitivity and concluded that peers were the most significant factor for both boys and girls, while media had little direct effect. Research has long shown that teenagers conform to clothing patterns as part of their social interactions, and this conformity often plays a critical role in peer acceptance (Smucker & Creekmore, 1972). Peers can exert influence in three ways: by serving as a source of information, by acting as models for comparison, and by applying normative pressure through rewards or sanctions (Astous et al., 2002; Solomon, Zaichkowsky, & Polegato, 1999 as cited in Smucker & Creekmore, 1972). Peers thus shape not only what teenagers buy but also how satisfied they feel with their choices (Hogg, Bruce, & Hill, 1998; Lewis, Dyer, & Moran, 1995; Sweeney-MacGillivray & Wilson, 1997; Wilson & MacGillivray, 1998 as cited in Creekmore, 1980). As part of their social learning, adolescents begin to associate brands with identity, developing preferences that are influenced by peer discussions. Those who engage more actively with peers about consumption decisions are especially likely to treat brand names as an essential criterion in their choices (Shim & Koh, 1997). This body of research strongly suggests that peer influence and brand sensitivity are positively related, particularly when it comes to clothing.

Theoretical Framework:

The strong base of theoretical concept is very important in the discipline of social sciences. For recent study multiple theories are applicable but C.H Cooley's theory "looking Glass Self" is very much important because it provides strong foundations for this study. Cooley argue that a person's self grows out of society's interpersonal interaction and the perception of others. Looking glass self refers to people shaping their identity based on the perception of others, which leads the people to reinforce other people's perspective on themselves. People shapes themselves based on what other people perceive and confirm other people's opinion of themselves. The recent study is also carrying the same theoretical framework as given by the C.H Cooley. Adolescents also shape their behavior according to their peer group's influence. In this study peer groups are like mirrors which are used by adolescents for shaping their personality. Today, brand culture is becoming very common especially among youth. so when adults see that their friends are wearing clothes of different brands and they are appreciated by other fellows than they also try to consume these branded.

The Data and Methods

This study has been conducted in district Gujrat as area and quantitative in nature. Purposive sampling is very much useful for present study because our target population was school children. Researchers have to collect data from schools of different economic status so we purposive select our samples. A survey method technique with structured questionnaire as a tool of data collection has been used to conduct the study. Two instruments were used for this study: Brand sensitivity- To measure the level of brand sensitivity among students, we applied Kapferer and Laurent's Brand Sensitivity Scale. Since the study was conducted in Pakistan, the scale was translated into Urdu and first tested on a small group of 15 students from Jinnah Public School in Gujrat to ensure clarity and reliability. To assess peer influence, we used the Susceptibility to Reference Group Influence Scale developed by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989), which was also translated into Urdu. This scale captures the ways in which young people are influenced by others—for example, their desire to shape their image based on how significant others view them, their willingness to conform to expectations in purchasing decisions, and their tendency to learn about

products by observing or seeking advice from peers. The research was carried out in the summer of 2013 with a convenience sample of 90 adolescents aged between 12 and 18 years, studying in grades 7 through 12. Participants were drawn from three secondary schools in Gujrat city, each representing different economic backgrounds as determined by their fee structures. To capture diversity, one school with a high fee structure, one with a low fee structure, and one in between were selected. After the school committees reviewed and approved the questionnaire, all three administrations agreed to allow their students to participate. From each school, 30 students were selected, evenly divided between boys and girls (15 male and 15 female). Those who consented to take part were given a pencil-and-paper questionnaire administered directly by the researchers. Participants were assured that their responses would remain completely confidential and anonymous, ensuring their comfort and honesty throughout the process.

Results and Discussion

This section has been based on the results and discussion as follows;

A total of 90 questionnaires were completed. These questionnaires were completed by young adults ranging from 15 to 19 years of age.

Hypothesis no. 1:

H1: There is a relationship between group influence and brand sensitivity.

To analyze our first hypothesis, Pearson correlation tests were used to verify if there were a relationship between brand sensitivity and group influenced on young adults or not.

Level of significance: - $\alpha = 0.05$

Table 1: *Relationship of brand sensitivity level and group influence level in young adults*

	Group influence
	.511**
Brand sensitivity	.000

Table 1 represents the relationship between brand sensitivity and group influence. This table shows that our P value 0.00 is less than 0.05. So our H0 is rejected H1 is accepted. It is concluded that there is a relationship between group influence and brand sensitivity. $r = 0.511$ is indicate that, there is a positive relationship between brand sensitivity and group influence.

Hypothesis No 2:

H1: There is a relationship between brand sensitivity of males young adults and females young adults.

To analyze our second hypothesis, independent-sample t test were used to compare the gender role in brand sensitivity.

Table 2: *Comparison of gender role in brand sensitivity*

Gender	N	Mean	Std.D	Std.E	F	P value
Male	45	20.22	6.10	.910	1.022	0.61
Female	45	17.91	5.43	.890		

The scores of this table shows that P-value is 0.61 which is more than significant its value of 0.05 which means there is no significant difference in the level of brand sensitivity with respect to their gender. Both males and females have equal level of significance. The mean is 20.22 for males and 17.91 for females. The F-value is 1.022.

Hypothesis No 3

H1: Young adults with high school status will be more brand sensitive than middle and lower school status.

To analyze our third hypothesis, One Way Anova was used to compare the brand sensitivity of young adults from lower, middle and high school status.

Table 3: *Comparison of brand sensitivity level among young adults from lower, middle and high school status.*

	SS	DF	MS	F	P value
Between group	485	2	242.50	8.201	.001
Within group	2572.60	87	29.57		
Total	3057.60	89			

Conclusion

In general, results indicate that brand sensitivity is related to level of group influence. As the analysis of correlation between brand sensitivity and group influence shows that there is a significance relationship between both variables. Results also consistent with Creekmore *et al.* (1980) who found that young people who follow commonly accepted dress codes are generally more welcomed by their peers than those who try to express individualism through clothing. Both earlier and current research highlight that clothing choices among adolescents are strongly shaped by peer influence. This aligns with Creekmore's (1980) findings that clothing is a key way for teenagers to gain social approval. Similarly, Smucker and Creekmore (1972) as well as Creekmore (1980) observed that adolescents who conform to clothing norms are more likely to be socially accepted than those who resist them. Further support comes from Shim and Koh's (1997) exploratory study, which found that teenagers who frequently discuss consumption with their friends are more likely to consider brands as an important factor when making choices. In this way, peer influence appears closely tied to brand sensitivity in clothing. Lachance and colleagues (2003) also reinforced this idea by examining how parents, peers, and media together shape adolescents' brand awareness and sensitivity. This study also explores that males and females are equally brand conscious. From researches it is shown that consumers who are more conscious regarding to their dressing or appearance more vulnerable to choose brands. In this context gender also influenced by brand sensitivity as females are more brand sensitive as compared to men. (Warrington and Shim, 2000; Beaudoin and Lachance, 2006).

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