

Influence of Social Reference Groups on Automobile Buying Decision – Research on Young Executives

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Influence of social reference groups is one of the many subconscious factors that can form a consumer behavior for products used in public settings. This phenomenon also affects our preferences for particular brands or products and influences our purchase decisions relating to them. Every marketer strives to tap the subconscious factors that can help strengthen the brand associations and drive purchase. The study seeks to evaluate the influence of three major types of reference group influences i.e. informational influence, utilitarian influence, and value-expressive influence on the automobile buying behavior of young executives. In a country like Pakistan where purchasing power is low, young executives become one of the prospect buyers for automobiles. Thus the results would help marketers in designing marketing communication campaigns in a way that could trigger psychological bonding between the customer and the most influential reference group thus ensuring a strong positive response.

Keywords: Reference Groups, Young Executives, Consumer Behavior, Automobile, and Marketing

Field of Interest: Marketing

1. Introduction

Consumer behavior is impacted by many external and internal factors. Internal factors are part of a consumer's personality such as value system, motivation, perception and learning capacity, while external factors include the environment, social norms, friends, family, and other role models. The collection of friends, family members, opinion leaders, and celebrities, in a sense, make up our "social reference groups". Sociologists, social psychologists, and cultural anthropologists unanimously hold the view that nearly all individuals in society belong to certain groups, and social reference groups influence their attitudes and conduct. These groups in effect become the reference points from where we take cues to configure our values and standards. This phenomenon also affects our preference for particular brands or categories of products and influences our purchase decisions relating to them. Many a time we seem to be making our purchase decisions subconsciously. Even there, the underlying forces that compel us to make the choices we make reflect our sense of belonging towards, or the influence or aspiration we seek or receive from our reference groups. This is evidence from research conducted by (J. Yang, X, & H. Lee, (2007) & Hundal, 2001). Another recent study conducted by Latif, S. Saleem and Z. U. Abideen (2011) highlighted that the role models like celebrities and spots personalities also influence the behavior of consumers. However this study has

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showed that formal reference groups influence most consumer behavior of young executives for the purchase of automobile.

The objectives of the research were to find out:

1. The significance of reference groups and their influence on young executives' decision-making in relation to the purchase of an automobile.
2. The influence of formal and informal reference groups.
3. Which influence type (utilitarian, informational and value expressive) has most significance on young executives' decision-making with regard to the purchase of their automobiles?
4. The relationship between "salary" and "type of car purchased".

Based on these objectives, the research first evaluates the past studies to draw some reference in designing the hypothesis and test them accordingly as per the methodology set forth. Some of the key terminologies are also define in context to the research for clear understanding of the concepts. The research results and findings are then used to suggest few implications for the marketers to develop effective strategies for their brands.

2. Literature Review

Reference Group is a group whose norms, values and rules are followed by an individual as a foundation of his daily behavior.

Formal primary reference groups are highly defined in structure and interact frequently - such as school groups, business groups and work groups. Informal primary reference groups include family and peer groups. Formal secondary groups may include alumni considered more impersonal and interact only occasionally (i.e. shopping groups, sports groups) organizations and technical associations. Informal secondary groups are

In Pakistan automobiles are purchased by people who have enough disposable income to be able to either finance the purchase entirely on their own or pay off loans borrowed from a bank. In a country such as Pakistan where unemployment is rampant, young executives are one of the more serious buyers or prospects for automobile manufacturers. As they progress in their professional arena and start earning a reasonable amount of money that leaves them with a disposable income, an automobile becomes their first or primary wish to fulfill. Automobiles are often seen as a status symbol in society, which explains their eminence in the minds of people entering into the work environment after finishing their college or university education. International studies have also confirmed that young executives regard the purchase of an automobile as a priority, and it is their second most expensive acquisition after rental or mortgage payment for their home. Therefore for marketers and brand managers in Pakistan too it becomes of vital importance to know how they can attract this potential segment of young executives.

Venkatesan (1996) has proven that people tend to get under societal influence when they opt to make a purchase decision of a high value, high involvement product. Since automobile is used to physically move around and to be noticed, it is important

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to know what factors influence young executives before they make their purchase decision in terms of a specific type, size or make of car.

Previous research has identified three major types of reference group influences that occur: informational influence, utilitarian influence, and value-expressive influence (Park & Lessig 1977; Bearden & Etzel 1982) that are briefly described below:

2.1 Informational Influence

The influence which is based on the craving to make informed decisions and optimize the choice is called informational influence (Park & Lessig 1977). In case of individual questing for the right information Kelman (1961) one would accept an influence that improves one's knowledge and ability to cope with the environment. When consumers lack knowledge regarding a certain product or the experience of purchasing the item, they may perceive the information and recommendation from their reference group as credible and thus accept it with a certain degree of confidence. Practical application of this behavior can be seen in the use of "expert power" or their internalization in advertising, for instance, featuring doctors (or actors in the role of medical doctors) as spokespersons for over-the-counter medicines.

2.2 Utilitarian Influence

This influence can be explained by the so-called "compliance process" in which an individual is willing to satisfy a certain group's expectation in order to obtain their praise or to avoid punishment from the group (Kelman 1961). Rock (1990) demonstrated in the famous Asch Experiment participants who were found to willingly imitate group answers, even changing their original right answers in the process. This explains how people strive to make themselves associated with certain groups in order to remain acceptable or to gain a position in society. The same idea has been used extensively in marketing communication that shows a consumer gaining a certain position by virtue of merely using a specific branded product.

2.3 Value-Expressive Influence

This influence may best be explained by the "identification process" in which people are willing to better express themselves to society in a manner that makes them appear to be similar to the group they want to belong to (Kelman 1961). Under this influence, one may actively follow the group's beliefs and rules, while neglecting the praises or punishments received, and decide to completely accept and internalize the value of that reference group.

2.4 Industry Analysis

The automobile industry is regarded as the single largest manufacturing industry in the world (Turnbull et al. 1992). A major reason for its eminence is that as a highly capital intensive industry it supports the development of ancillary industries and serves as a major driver of economic growth. In 2010, the European Union (EU) automobile industry contributed nearly 10% to total manufacturing output. In Germany, which is the largest automotive manufacturing country in Europe, the contribution was closer to 20%. According to the International Organization of Motor Vehicle Manufacturers, commonly known as OICA (Organisation Internationale des

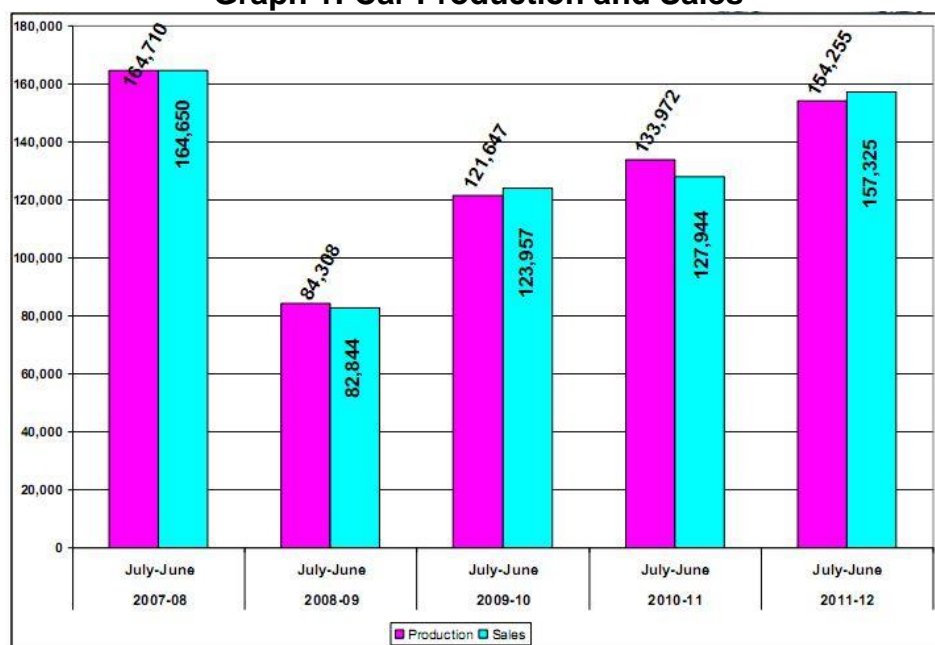
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Constructeurs' Automobiles), if auto manufacturing were a country, it would be the sixth largest economy in the world. In Pakistan too, the automobile industry has a significant standing having contributed 16% to overall manufacturing industry output in 2011 – 2012.

Presently there are five major assemblers, multinational companies with joint-venture arrangements such as Toyota, Honda, Suzuki, Hino, Nissan, Hyundai/ Kia that are engaged in progressive manufacturing / assembly of different automobiles, working under individual deletion programs agreed with the Ministry of Industries and Production, Government of Pakistan. Following a significant dip in 2008-09 mainly because of suspension of auto loans by all commercial banks in Pakistan, the industry recovered gradually in the next two year but more significantly in the year 2011-12, registering a 22% rate of growth over the preceding year.

The graphs 1 and 2 represent the progress in the production of cars and jeeps over a 5 year period. It is evident that despite the recovery in the production and sales of cars, production in 2011-12 remained below what was achieved in 2007-08.

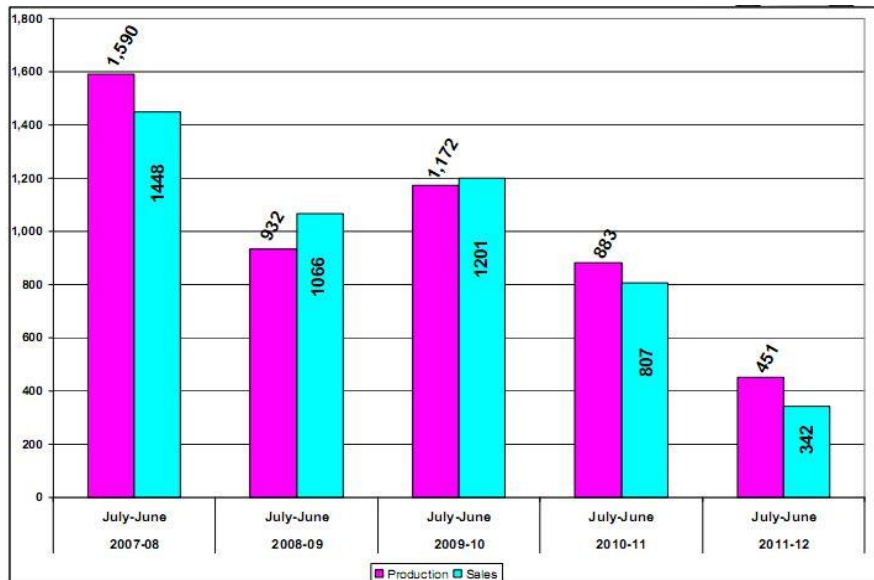
Graph 1: Car Production and Sales



Source: Pakistan Automobile Manufacturers Association

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Graph 2: Jeep Production and Sales



The market share of the Top 3 brands of cars (sedan cars and hatchbacks) in 2011-12 has been reported as follows in table 1:

Table 1: Market Share

Rank	Brand	Market Share
1	Suzuki	64%
2	Toyota	30%
3	Honda	3%

Source: <http://focus2move.com/component/k2/item/93-pakistan-car-industry-2012-outlook-suzuki-dominates>

The Top 5 Car/ Van/ Jeep models in terms of sales in 2011 -12 were:

Table 2: Top 5 Automobile Brands

Rank	Model
1	Toyota Corolla
2	Suzuki Mehran
3	Suzuki Bolan
4	Suzuki Alto
5	Suzuki Ravi
6	Suzuki Cultus
7	Suzuki Swift
8	Honda Civic
9	Daihatsu Cuore
10	Toyota Hilux

Source: Pakistan Automobile Manufacturers Association

Considering the importance of automobile market and its young executives as its prospect buyers available literature has been reviewed. On the basis of available literature hypothesis are constructed and their testing and results are discussed in conclusion of this paper. Research findings are beneficial for marketers for policy implication to attract young executives towards their automobile brands.

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A study undertaken on a general audience suggests that with regard to “publicly consumed necessities” such as wristwatches, automobiles and men’s suits, weak reference group influence is seen with regard to product purchase decision, but strong reference group influence is seen with regard to “brand purchase decision”. However, there has not been any significant research undertaken specifically on the influence of reference groups on young executives’ purchase decision for automobiles. Hence, most of the reviewed literature quoted, pertains to reference groups’ influence on buying decisions in general.

Social and interpersonal influence research can be traced back to Hyman (1942), who first elaborated the term ‘reference group’ when he asked respondents “with which individuals or groups they compared themselves”. The term has been redefined since with substantial amount of additional research leading to a much broader definition – the reference groups as groups or individuals, directing one’s purchasing behavior in a particular situation. Kelley (1947) distinguished between reference groups used as standards of comparison for self-appraisal (comparative) and those used as a source of personal norms, attitudes, and values (normative). More specifically, the reference groups in this research consists of not only groups that an individual has frequent contact with (such as family members, work associates, friends, classmates and etc.) but, also groups that an individual does not have a membership in or a direct contact with, such as certain “expected groups” or people at a certain social level (Hawkins et al. 1998).

In order to make purchase decisions, consumers acquire knowledge, skills, and dispositions through exposure to social models (Jiaqin et. al, 2007). A study was conducted by Bourne (1957) to understand the impact of reference groups and the determinants of their susceptibility. The study explored the influence of reference groups on the purchase of several consumer goods and concluded that the “conspicuousness” of a product is a strong determinant of its susceptibility to reference group influence- which means that a high involvement product or products used in societal setup are susceptible to greater reference group influence. This study is further endorsed by studies Triandis & Gelfand (1998) which indicated that even group interaction has a strong influence in promoting changed attitudes and behavior in various situations, even among members of groups who were initially strangers. Forces that influence purchasing attitudes are now becoming critical in consumer research. The better a marketer understands factors influencing the decision making process of his/her potential customer base, the better the brand recall or association that can be established between the brand and the consumer.

Within social learning theory, individuals develop general behaviors and attitudes by modeling the behavior of others (Bandura 1986). In communication and advertising research, the social learning model has often been a popular choice for explaining consumer behavior. Wooten & Reed (2004) suggested that consumers with high involvement to use product in social gatherings tend to use protective self- expression to avoid disapproval from others. Ferle & Chan (2008) stated that among teenagers, media celebrities’ influence was found to be a stronger indicator of materialism than peer influence. Further it demonstrated that celebrity endorsement affects consumers’ feelings in general and it could affect the attitude of consumers towards the advertisement and brands as well.

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Moreover a cross cultural research conducted by J. Yang, X. He & H. Lee (2007) to find out mobile users consumer behavior suggested that informational influence has the strongest impact on U.S and Chinese consumers. A recently conducted study Hundal (2001) aimed at understanding the consumer purchase behavior in the Amritsar district of Punjab, in India, revealed that family members have a role and influence in the making of purchase decisions for durables including refrigerators, televisions, air coolers, and washing machines.

It has been observed Palan & Wilkes (1997) that adolescent-parent interaction also occurs in decision making and that besides direct requests, adolescents are likely to use bargaining (money deals, other deals, and reasoning) and persuasion (opinions, begging) as strategies to influence decision outcomes. It has also been found in India Singh (1998) and in the US Jensen (1995) that purchase requests by adults are strongly stimulated by a friend who may have recently purchased a product. A point to note is that these products relate to home settings.

Adolescents choose vicarious role models that believe to be similar to their race and sex. However a very prominent study by (Park and Lessig, 1977; Bearden and Etzel, 1982) which is still referred to today in reference group researches stated that an individual who is more susceptible to interpersonal influence will try to satisfy reference group's expectations by complying with group norms irrespective of the presence or otherwise of perceived similarities.

2.5 Research Gaps

In summary, existing literature amply demonstrates that reference groups have significant influence on consumers' purchasing behavior. While a consumer may consider whether to follow the group consciously or not, in most cases, one will agree with the group subconsciously. A second important aspect is that different stages of life (adolescence etc) and product usage setup (family, personal and societal) also affect the association of a consumer or influence under specific reference groups (formal or informal).

This study seeks to evaluate the influence of formal/ informal reference groups on the automobile buying behavior of young executives. Literature does not provide any such research conducted in recent times in Pakistan.

Past literature gives evidence about influence of social reference groups on consumers and specifically when they purchase a product, which is used in social setting, but there is a limitation in past literature as there is absence of research conducted to find out influence of reference groups on young executives. Secondly there are not significant researches to understand the influence of formal reference groups on young executives.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Hypotheses

H_a(1): *Reference groups have a significant influence on the young executives with respect to cars they purchase.*

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H_a(2): *Work colleagues have the stronger influence on the decision making than informal reference groups (friends).*

H_a(3): *Value expressive influence is significantly most important influence model.*

H_a(4): *There is a strong relationship between salary and the type of car intended to purchase.*

3.2 Research Methodology

In order to test our hypothesis a questionnaire was adapted from previous research conducted by (Park & Lessig, 1977) on social reference groups. Young executives were interviewed personally. In this regard 25 local and Multinational companies were contacted and young executives from different departments were interviewed personally. Hence data collection was time consuming and due to time constraint sample size was limited to 125, though it took more than 7 months to collect data. The conceptual framework for the research is presented below:

Table 3: Research Methodology

Research Step	How they were addressed?
Data Collection	Primary data used
Participants Characteristics	Male and Female; Age 22-35 years; Working in local/multinational companies; Minimum Education: Graduate
Sampling Technique	Convenience Sampling
Sample Size	125
Instruments	Structured Questionnaire
Analysis Tool	MS Excel and SPSS

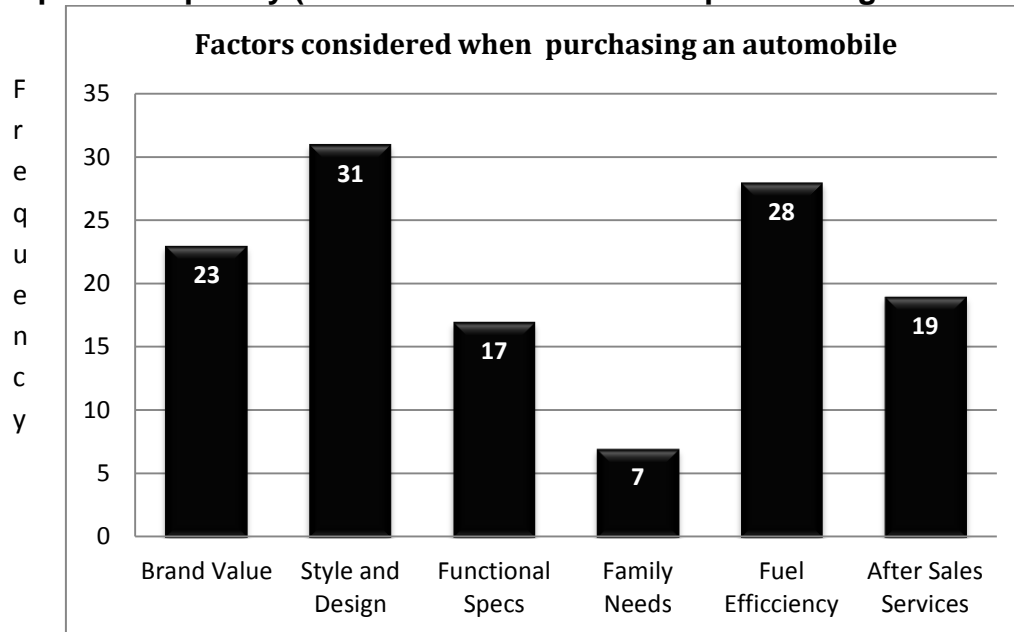
Influence was recorded on a 5-point scale, interpreted as follows:

- 5 = Strongly Agree
- 4 = Agree
- 3 = Neutral
- 2 = Disagree
- 1 = Strongly Disagree.

4. Research Findings

The research revealed that most (31%) respondent considered Style and Design as being the most important consideration, while Fuel Efficiency (28%) came out as a close second. However it was evident that young executives did not see family needs as a priority when it came to an automobile purchase decision.

Graph 3: Frequency (Factors Considered when purchasing an automobile)



4.1 Hypotheses 1

One sample t- test was performed to check Hypothesis 1. As the results show, the significance value is $p = 0.000$ which is less than 0.05 indicating that there is an influence of the reference groups on young executives’ purchase decision with regard to automobiles. Positive upper and lower limits of confidence interval signify that the more responses are positive, the greater the indication of the reference group’s influence on the subject’s (young executives, in this case) purchase decision towards automobiles.

Table 3(a)

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
RG_Influence	125	3.1972	.41284	.03693

Table 3(b)

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 3					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
RG_Influence	5.341	124	.000	.19720	.1241	.2703

4.2 Hypotheses 2

The second hypothesis proposes that work colleagues have stronger influence on young executives purchase decision for automobiles. The result presented below supports Hypothesis 2 as t-test significance value for work colleagues is 0.001 which

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is even lower than the significance value for friends which is 0.014. Since both values are less than 0.05 it can be inferred that work colleagues and friends both have an influence on young executives. However there is a greater influence of work colleagues in purchasing an automobile.

Table 4(a)

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
My friends' evaluation and preference will influence my choice	125	3.29	1.288	.115
Expectations of fellow work associates, will influence my decision to purchase a particular make/ model of a car	125	3.38	1.203	.108

Table 4(b)

	Test Value = 3					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
My friends' evaluation and preference will influence my choice	-2.500	124	.014	-.288	-.06	.52
Expectations of fellow work associates, will influence my decision to purchase a particular make/ model of a car	3.496	124	.001	.376	.16	.59

4.3 Hypotheses 3

Hypothesis 3 was also empirically examined to find out which type of reference group influence model had most influence. Below results clearly show that informational and value expressive type of influence have a significant positive impact on young executives' purchase decision for cars (Significance value = 0.001 and 0.000 respectively). However, utilitarian influence type is not.

Table 5(a)

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Value Expressive - Informational	.14400	.83689	.07485	-.04016	.29216	1.924	124	.047
Pair 2	Value Expressive - Utilitarian	.23880	.85753	.07670	-.08699	.39061	3.113	124	.002

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Table 5(b)

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Informational	125	3.1808	.61666	.05516
Utilitarian	125	3.0860	.64061	.05730
ValueExpressive	125	3.3248	.67330	.06022

Table 5(c)

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = 3						
						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper	
Informational	3.278	124	.001	.18080	.0716	.2900	
Utilitarian	1.501	124	.136	.08600	-.0274	.1994	
ValueExpressive	5.393	124	.000	.32480	.2056	.4440	

These results also unveil another important aspect, that young executives do not conform to reference group influence in order to realize a reward or avoid punishment because utilitarian influence has no significance for them, but they utilize them to fulfill their information needs as well as social needs. It has been observed that the desire for upward mobility is more pronounced among young executives at the start of their careers, as “advancement up the managerial ladder secures increases in status, recognition, salary, influence and power”.

4.4 Hypotheses 4

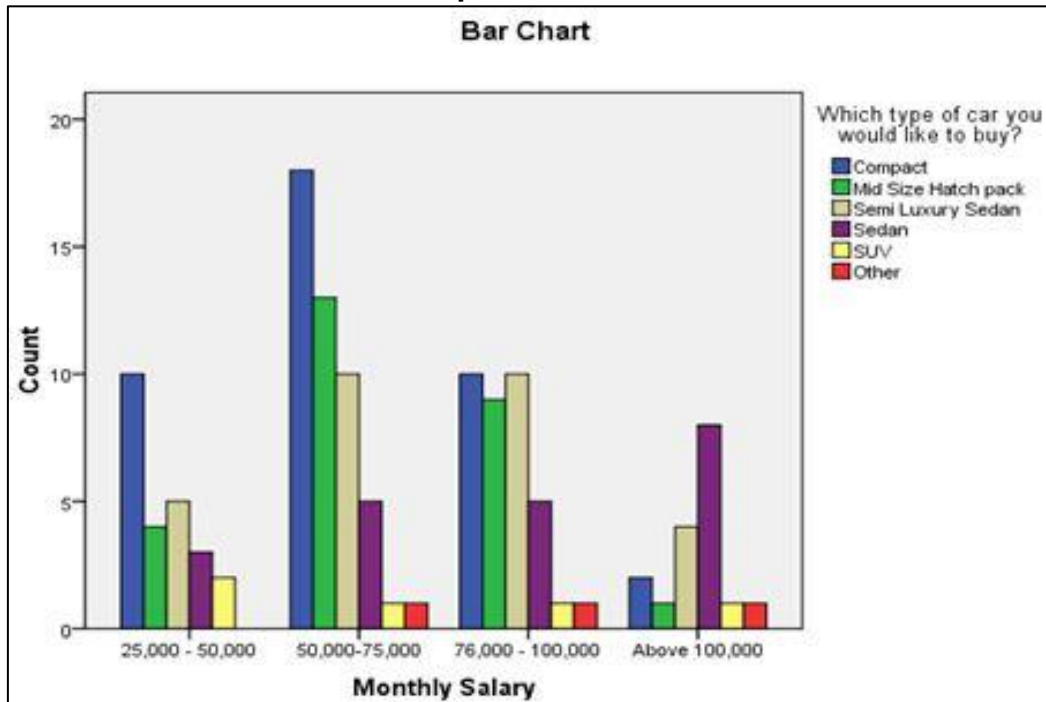
The graph below depicts the relationship between a young executive’s salary and the type of automobile he/ she intends to purchase, By looking at the graph one can find that the largest group of young executives (32%) indicated a preference for buying a compact car. However, 22% showed an inclination towards a mid-size hatchback, 23% wanted a Semi-Luxury Sedan and 17% suggested they would prefer to buy a sedan car.

**Table 6(a):
Monthly Salary and Which type of car you would like to buy?**

Salary (PKR)	Which type of car you would like to buy?						Total
	Compact	Mid-Size Hatch pack	Semi Luxury Sedan	Sedan	SUV	Other	
Slab A 25,000 - 50,000	10	4	5	3	2	0	24
Slab B 50,000-75,000	18	13	10	5	1	1	48
Slab C 76,000 - 100,000	10	9	10	5	1	1	36
Slab D Above 100,000	2	1	4	8	1	1	17
Total	40 (32%)	27 (22%)	29 (23%)	21 (17%)	5	3	125

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Graph 4



To check the significance of Hypothesis 4 Chi Square test was performed (see below). Chi square was calculated at 21.310 with 15 degrees of freedom with a significance value of 0.127 which is more than the cutoff value of 0.05. Hence it may be concluded that there is no direct relationship between monthly salary and the decision to purchase an automobile, which leads to the rejection of our Hypothesis 4.

Table 6 (b):
Chi-Square Tests

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	21.310 ^a	15	.127
Likelihood Ratio	19.980	15	.173
Linear-by-Linear Association	7.614	1	.006
N of Valid Cases	125		

a. 12 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .41.

Correlation test was also performed to check the significance of association between salary and the type of automobile young executives intend to purchase. Test results below indicate that the value of correlation coefficient is 0.241, which states that there is a moderate relationship between two variables while significance value of 0.007 which is more than cutoff value of 0.05. Therefore association is not significant between monthly salary and the types of automobile young executives intend to purchase.

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Table 6 (c)

Correlations

			Monthly Salary	Which type of car you would like to buy?
Spearman's rho	Monthly Salary	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.241**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.007
		N	125	125
	Which type of car you would like to buy?	Correlation Coefficient	.241**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.
		N	125	125

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the research findings, it may be concluded that reference groups do have an influence on young executive to while making a purchase decision for automobiles. The influence of formal reference groups is comparatively stronger than informal reference groups as highlighted by Latif, S. Saleem & Z. U. Abideen (2011) stated that celebrities and informal groups are more influential. According to our study it is worth noting that the significance of value expressive influence is higher than informative or utilitarian which is different from research conducted by (Jiaqin et.al 2007) which stated that informational influence is significant over utilitarian and value expressive influence. Hence as per our study it can be stated that there is a greater role for value expressive influence in stimulating a purchase decision.

By juxtaposing the above two results it can be deduced that young executives are more keen on choosing an automobile to impress others – a factor known as “conspicuous consumption” a term attributed to sociologist/ economist Thorstein Veblen. Another important thing to consider is that as young executives are in the early stage of their professional careers they are keen to impress others by choosing brands that reflect more positively on their personalities. Marketers can thus use this consumer insight and influence such unconscious behavior of young executives through formal reference groups, and also by including value expressive elements to attract this group of people towards their brands. Same marketing implication can be used for cause based behavioral change marketing campaigns targeted towards bringing a positive change in society.

5.1 Limitations

Although the research was conducted in Karachi, with a sample size of 125 young executives, the city has a much-diversified sample based on demographics as well as psychographics. Hence, the results of this study can be generalized to a great extent for the entire urban population of the country. However, as an extension, future research can be under taken to examine the role of reference groups on purchase decision of young executives on a national level, using this study as a baseline study or for comparative purposes.

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Also, future research could involve a larger sample size so that the results can be accepted with a higher degree of confidence. Finally, although this study was focused entirely on the target market of young executives its coverage may be extended to include automobile dealers, who form the other part of the proverbial equation, to give it greater depth.

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