

## **CONSUMER BEHAVIOR AMONG YOUNG FEMALE CONSUMERS IN SAUDI ARABIA: THE ROLE OF PEER AND PARENTAL INFLUENCE IN BUYING DECISIONS**

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**Abstract:** Consumer behavior is a critical concern for producers and marketers to understand as it has a significant impact on the success or failure of a product or service. This study examines the influence of parental and peer power on the purchase decisions of young female consumers in Saudi Arabia. The study utilized social power theory, and data was collected using a self-administered survey distributed to 285 young female Saudi consumers. The findings revealed high influence levels of parents' legitimate, referent, and reward power, while peer power was highest in areas of expertise, reward, and legitimate power. The results offer critical insights to producers and marketers on the importance of considering family and peer power in consumers' decision-making processes. The study highlights the overall importance of parental and peer power in consumer decision-making. The findings suggest that designing optimal marketing strategies for young female consumers requires considering the role of parents and peers in their purchasing decisions. Marketers targeting young female consumers in Saudi Arabia need to focus not only on consumers but also on the factors influencing their purchasing decisions. Overall, the study highlights that peer and parental power plays a significant role in consumer decision-making, which marketers need to consider when targeting young female consumers in Saudi Arabia.

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**Keywords:** parental power, peer power, consumer behavior, purchasing decisions, young female Saudi consumers, social power theory.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Consumer decision making is defined as the behavior patterns which influence and determine the decision process of the consumers for the acquisition needs (products, ideas, and services) and the satisfaction derived from them (Du Plessis et al., 1991). However, consumer decision making consists of five stages which include the purchase of product or services, recognizing the need, gathering the information and sources, evaluating alternatives, and making the decision (Kotler & Armstrong 2011; Wiese & Kruger, 2016). Thus, the buying

decision is a psychological process often used by consumers before, during, and after acquiring goods or services (Engel et al., 1968).

The dynamics of society changes and development have an important impact on decision making. Many major social transformations have affected the whole pattern of Arab society (Zu'abi, 2018). Thus, impact of peers' influence on consumer's intellectual development is an important issue. Peer influence is expected to have a high impact on the behavior of the consumer, especially the female consumers. Peers' influence behavior can be either a positive or a negative effect (Esser, 2014). These behavioral changes could be understood in terms

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of social comparison theory, which outlines the consequences of group dynamism and people's need to evaluate their opinions and abilities. The distinction between informational and normative social influence underlines the importance of people's standing in groups for their self-esteem. Peers effect is a consequence of prolonged interactions between consumers, especially those who stay for many hours together, daily and for many years. The buying decision taken by the young consumers is affected by several variables which could lead to risky decisions or non-preferable decisions. In addition, despite the fact that they were economically irrelevant a few years ago, this age group has recently shown an increasing interest in academics (La Ferle et al., 2000). Currently, however, they are an important segment of the consumer market, since their disposable income has grown steadily over the years (Moses, 2000). Further, as adolescents are more aware of a variety of topics, they often serve as sources of information and, ultimately, make purchasing decisions for their families. (Gil et al., 2012).

The literature of studies that is related to the influence of parents and peers on the Saudi female consumers are rare. Because of the lack of such literature's contributions in Saudi Arabia, the following could be summarized as the contribution of the current study: the use of social power theory in explaining perceived parental and peer influences on purchasing decisions making; investigating female consumers' perception on the effect of family power in terms of purchasing decisions; and contributing to existing and non-existing literature on perception of female consumers. The study aims to explore the influence of parents and peers on buying decisions for the young Saudi female consumers, based on two landmark theories namely; the social comparison theory and the social power theory.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Social Comparison Theory*

In 1950, Leon Festinger formulated the theory of social comparison processes; the theory imagines people to be quite open to find out how accurate or correct their opinions are, and how good their abilities are. It also made some assumptions that the pressures toward uniformity that operate on individuals are all in the service of the objective of self-evaluation. People confirm that there is opinion uniformity in the group to provide a basis for individuals to evaluate their opinions (Buunk & Mussweiler, 2001). ***The Social Power Theory***

The social power theory was first established in 1959 by French and Raven; the theory stipulates the five social power bases, which includes;

- Expert power: when an individual assumes that the parent or peer is an expert, or has expert knowledge, or possesses special information.
- Legitimate power: when an individual perceives that parents or peers have a legitimate right to impose behavioral requirements on them.
- Referent power: when an individual personally identifies with the parent or peer.
- Reward power: when an individual perceives that parents or peers have the ability to confer rewards on them.

- Coercive power: when an individual perceives that parents or peers have the ability to confer punishment upon them (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010).

### ***Peers Influence***

A peer group is defined as a close group within the same age engaging in similar activities. Peer groups are networks of individuals who spent most of the time together (Bristol & Mangleburg, 2005; Brown et al., 2008). Additionally, previous studies have found that even teenagers with high levels of self-esteem and selfconfidence are susceptible to peer pressure (Michell & Amos, 1997). Thus, peer influence, which is the ability of peers to shape and reshape the attitudes and behaviors of the group member, acts in a directional behavior, either good, bad or neutral behavior. Previous studies found that when peer influence exists, it leads to a positive motivation of the consumers, it may also lead to negative motivation; if weak consumers gain more from their association with strong peers than the stronger consumers that remain unaffected in the association with other peer members. The overall learning would be increased by a reduced stratification; a point made by McPherson and Schapiro (1990) in suggesting random assignment of students in colleges.

Dodge (1993) described a close association between weak peer relationships and social cognitive skill deficits. He found that adolescents who had established a positive peer relationship generated more alternative solutions to problems, planned more mature solutions and were found to be more rational than individuals who had developed negative peer relationships. In a study that examined the relation between familiarity with the willingness to exert peer pressure among adolescents, McPhee (1996) found that participants were more likely to exert pressure on friends than their approach to learning and getting knowledge.

Several pieces of research that investigate the peer-to-peer social influences found that the expert/referent styles manager is high in performance, while the expert, reward, and legitimate powers were perceived as the highest in powers. Referent power was the major influence on peer compliance; on the other hand, peer coercive and reward power weakened team participation (Pitts, 1990). The most significant steps are offered by Katz et al. (2001), Sacerdote (2001), and Mcilveen (2009), who used data that were randomized assignments of individuals to peer groups. However, all these papers are challenged by the consequences of local confounding factors. More specifically, Sacerdote (2001) found the evidence that supports peer effects among students randomly assigned to the same dorm are varying.

Four different types of peer relationships were classified by Eder (1995); dyadic friendships, romantic relationships, peer group interaction, and peer culture exert influence. These types offer the opportunities for the peer to influence consumers' behaviors. Peer influence operates through peer networks or large groups of peers with whom they associate. Young consumers within networks tend to be similar to one another (Schunk & Pajares, 2000), which enhances the likelihood of influence by modeling. Networks tend to be another channel that helps to define consumers' opportunities for interactions and observations of others, as well as their access to activities (Leung et al., 2010; Steinberg, 2004). Overtime and continual interactions amongst the network members conform to similar values. Discussions between friends influence peer choices on activities and their way of thinking; this explains the reasons why friends often make similar choices and the same decisions.

The most obvious effect of the peer was explained by Zimmerman (2003), he found that the grades of average students might be reduced by the weak peers, and the students may perform better when grouped with students of similar ability. The evidence tends to show higher peer effects when the outcome is related to the social reciprocated friendship status (Card & Giuliano 2013; Sacerdote, 2014). According to Mangleburg et al. (2004), peer expert power has a high impact on attitudes and behavior which was suggested as the importance of peer referent power. He reported that friends and peer groups influence the choices of an individual. Soh et al. (2018) pointed out that the influence of peers on individual behavior is competing with parents' influence.

In recent study, a model was developed to considers teenagers' attachment to their parents and peers as well as their ethical behavior as consumers, the study considers two paths direct (Social Attachment > Consumer Ethics) and indirect (Social Attachment > Money and Materialism > Consumer Ethics). According to the results, social attachment discourages unethical beliefs directly, but indirectly encourages them through monetary values (Gentina, Tang & Gu, 2018).

### ***Parents Influence***

People often adopt a group thinking approach when the need for agreement becomes so important in a group that supersedes a more realistic, rational, and reasonable opinion (Janis, 2004), as cited in Aronson, 2004). These groups typically feel that they are very optimistic, helpful, especially when the opposition is discouraged (Aronson, 2004). As the group increasingly discourages opposing views, the group members begin to review themselves and their beliefs. In particular, when a decision has to be made, individuals consider their parents as partners to increase their initiative for involving their parents as supporters when they approach a deadline in a micro-cycle of goal striving. Parents may initiate conversations and offer opportunities to reflect on any ongoing choice process. Regarding support and interference, Heckhausen et al. (2010) found that youths often report elevated levels of parental support and interference, particularly while sending applications.

Early studies used social power theory to measure a child's influence (8 to 11 years) on parents' buying decisions. Flurry and Burns (2005) found that children use expert, referent, and reward power to influence parents positively. Davis (1976) conducted a study using social power theory to explain husband-wife decisions. Concerning decision-making difficulties, the results show parental interference associations with lack of engagement as a significant variable when predicting decision problems simultaneously. The results support the statement that adolescents from strict monitoring and tough families are more inclined to encounter difficulties in decision-making (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Robertson & Symons, 1996). Leung et al. (2010) reviewed the literature on the influence of family on career development and observed that few studies examined the relationship between specific parental behaviors and adolescent career development. The ways parents used to influence adolescent career development were not clear and not explored yet. However, in many Asian and Chinese communities, career choice and issues that are related to work could infrequently be derived from relationship issues.

Studies have found no correlations between decision-making difficulties and family variables (Guerra & Braungart-Rieker, 1999; Dietrich & Barbel, 2009), whereas others reported mediated effects of family status on indecision via self-efficacy (Mcilveen, 2009). Other studies conducted with adolescents in high school indicated stronger associations between family status and decision-making difficulties (Leung et al., 2010). The influence of parent's teens' buying decisions through expert and referent power, while legitimate power tends to be insignificant. On the other hand, coercion is expected to have a negative effect (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010).

In recent years, a new perspective and approach to the subject has emerged. Steinberg (2004) found that risktaking in the real world is the product of both psychosocial and logical reasoning. Several studies discussed parents' influence from many aspects; Wenk et al. (1994) stated that parents' influence performance is high. Rueter and Conger (1995) found the level of parent-adolescent conflict is caused by family context. Research has found further support for the young female consumers' decisions. The results show high scores have been associated with maximizing expected value (Parker & Weller, 2015).

Leung et al. (2010) found that there is a positive relationship between those who experience higher degrees of cultural-values conflicts and the level of decision-making difficulties. In contrast to those who experience a lower degree of cultural-values conflict and the level of decision-making difficulties, three approaches were combined together, an informational influence perspective, social learning theory elements, and the theory of

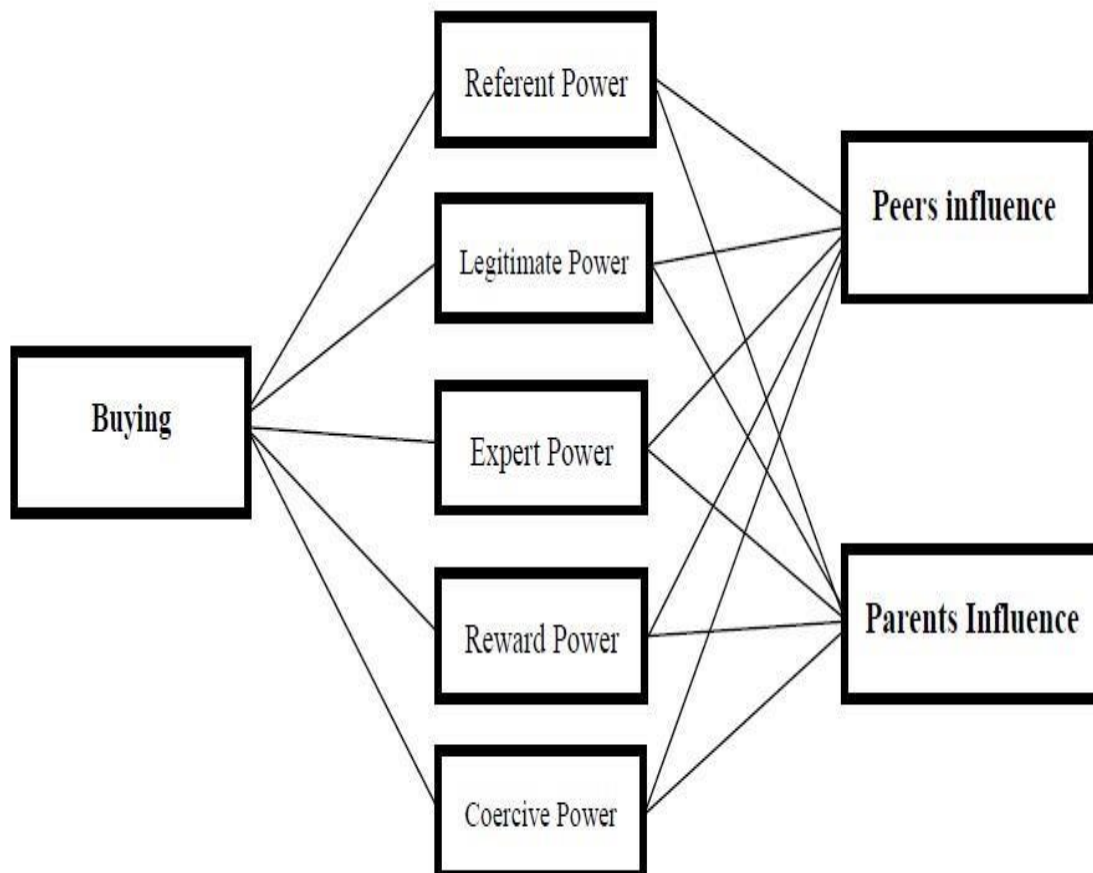
reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). These appear to emphasize much of the extant theory regarding the absence of culture and absence of norms in shaping individual absence behaviors. Jo~ao et al. (2018) found that youth enjoy showing their parents how to make a safe decision, but peers don't exhibit such characteristics.

### ***Buying Decision***

Consumer behavior is defined as the process and activities people engage in when searching, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating, and disposing products and services, to satisfy their needs and desires (Belch & Belch, 1998). Consumer behavior is a process done by consumers to satisfy their needs and wants (Gunay & Baker, 2011). According to the purchasing decisions of young consumers, recent studies have focused on the effect of contextual influences on adults to guide their behavior towards healthy decisions. Several other studies show that family, friends, and neighbors are essential factors which affect young consumers' decision making when selecting a brand (Perreau, 2014; Telzer, 2016). A case study in Vietnam looks at what factors that influence students' decision on buying milk. The results show that students consider customer services, product availability and the influence of reference groups more than the product quality and price (NGO, 2019). Purchasing decisions are processes that the consumer makes to acquire a product. The consumer passes through five stages of the buying decision process, which include; problem recognition, information research, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision, and post-purchase behavior (Kotler & Keller, 2009).

### **Theoretical Framework Research Model**

A conceptual model has been developed to integrate the five bases of social power influence to illustrate the influence on buying decision making as shown in Figure1 below.



**Figure 1: Research Model Research Hypotheses**

Several studies indicate that young consumers perceive their peers as experts and may otherwise not believe in their parent's experience (Sacerdote, 2001; Mangleburg et al., 2004; Mcilveen, 2009). Accordingly, the first hypothesis will be

- **H1a:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with a parent's expert power.
- **H1b:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with peer's expert power.

The traditional social influence paradigm recommends that the employees engage in social comparison to acquire simply more reliable information which would form the basis of their decision (Bamberger & Michal, 2007). Peer referents may play a vital role in the social comparison process as the peer is the nearest person to the consumer (Pitts, 1990). Students are likely to compare themselves with their peers who tend to reduce the parental referent power; this will lead to the second hypothesis;

- **H2a:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with a parent's referent power.
- **H2b:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with the peer's referent power.

Parents' related attitudes and expectations may possibly create conflicts and troubles; however, at the same time parents provide and support the individual (Young et al., 2001). The most peer influence was founded by Zimmerman (2003); this was the peer group where individuals follow the group and accept their behaviors; thus, the third hypothesis will be;

- **H3a:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with a parent's legitimate power. ● **H3b:**

Buying decisions will be significantly associated with the peer's legitimate power.

Sharma and Nanda (1997) reported in their study on aggressive parents that a good parents/adolescents relationship will reduce aggression. Parental pressure can lead individuals to experience anxiety and indecision. On the other hand, people found peer coercion to be little or none on an individual (Dietrich & Barbel, 2009), so the fourth hypothesis is;

- **H4a:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with a parent's coercive power.
- **H4b:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with the peer's coercive power.

When parents are actively engaged in their ward choices, individuals report a higher level of reward from their parents. On the other hand, expectations of reward from peers are less than parents. This conforms to the theories of motivation which state that goal tracking contributes to a high level of satisfaction and well-being (Heckhausen et al., 2010). Thus, the fifth hypothesis will be;

- **H5a:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with a parent's reward power.
- **H5b:** Buying decisions will be significantly associated with the peer's reward power.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY Data Collection and Sampling Framework**

The data for this study was collected via a self-administered survey (questionnaire), distributed to young female consumer participants between the ages of 19 to 23, as this is the age where opinion is easily influenced by others. It is common for children and adolescents to give into peer pressure because they wish to be liked or out of concern they may be ridiculed if they do not conform to the group's expectations (Wooten, 2006). Participants were informed of the purpose of the research, and their responses remained confidential. The selected participants were given the instructions before filling out the questionnaire.

We collected data on three demographic characteristics: age, education, and family income. However, no incentives were provided, but only 285 of 300 returned the surveys (95% response rate). The sample characteristics are shown in table 1.

**Table 1: Sample Characteristics**

Sample Characteristics	Percentage %	
<b>Age</b>	Less than 20 Y.	45.3%
	Above 20Y	44.7%
<b>Education</b>	Diploma	56.4%
	Bachelor Degree	43.6%
<b>Family Income</b>	Less than 15000 SR	21.4%
	More than 15000 SR	78.6%

**Data Collection Instrument**

The study utilizes the scales for peer and parental influence prepared by Goodrich and Mangleburg (2010) in their study to measure peer and parents influence on product purchase. The original scale was reported to have been used by Gaski (1986). The scale adopted for this research has the most highly evaluated reliability of 0.88. A 5-point Likert scale was used for the social power scales, which was anchored by "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree" options. The questionnaire was initially developed in English and then translated into the Arabic language. To ensure translation equivalence, the questionnaire was then translated back into English by three marketing academic professors; this helped to clarify ambiguous questions. The items were rearranged under each type of power. The pilot study from 35 female participants was conducted to pretest the final questionnaire. Furthermore, the internal consistency of the scales appears to be good, 0.89 for the female sample. The average  $\alpha$ coefficient for the peer and parents questionnaire was 0.88. The  $\alpha$ -coefficient for all questionnaire items was 0.907. However, the issue in content validity lies in the procedures through examination of the previous empirical and theoretical work. The operational definition for each variable was conduct. Also, the demographic variables were added to separate parts of the questionnaire.

**Statistical Analysis Techniques**

The collected data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Science). Frequency and percentages were calculated to interpret the demographic characteristic of the students. Regression analysis was carried out to measure the different level of association between study variables (social power dimensions and buying decisions).

**Statistical Analysis Results**

In light of previous research, some hypotheses were constructed and tested from the empirical evidence taken from data. Cronbach's alpha was used to measure how well variables assess a single one-dimensional (Table 2).

**Table 2: Dimensions items/ reliabilities of Social Power Factors**

Social Power Factors	Parents		Peers	
	Items	Reliability	Items	Reliability
Expert	4	.817	4	.811
Referent	3	.696	3	.803
Legitimate	4	.546	4	.593

Coercive	5	.746	4	.749
Reward	5	.835	5	.890

**Table 3: Analysis result of the Buying decisions association with peer and Parent Social Power Factors**

Hypotheses	$\beta$	P-value	Results
Parent expert power	0.028	0.284	Not supported
Parent referent power	-0.098	0.001	Supported
Parent legitimate power	-0.095	0.008	Supported
Parent coercive power	0.065	0.165	Not Supported
Parent reward power	0.075	0.032	Supported
Peer expert power	0.059	0.034	Supported
Peer referent power	0.000	0.988	Not Supported
Peer legitimate power	0.087	0.021	Supported
Peer coercive power	-0.125	0.014	Supported
Peer reward power	0.091	0.040	Supported

The model summary shows a large correlation between the dependent variable buying decision and the independent variables, which was found at 0.853; this indicates that more than 85% of the changes in the dependent variable is an influence from the independent variables, while the other 15% is from the consumers themselves or from other hidden variables. Expert power hypothesis H1 is partially supported; the results fail to support H1a prediction of significant parent expert power on consumers' buying decisions ( $p.0.284 > 0.05$ ). On the other hand, peer expert power is significant with ( $p.034 < 0.05$ ), the coefficient  $\beta = 0.059$ , means a positive association between peer expert and consumers' choice which support H1b. Parental referent power has a significant association ( $p.001 < 0.05$ ), and  $\beta = -0.098$ , indicates that there is a negative association between parents and consumers' choice which supported H2a. For the peer referent power ( $p.988 > 0.05$ ), the coefficient  $\beta = 0.000$ , indicates no association between peer referent power and consumers' choice, which fail to supported H2b. Parent legitimate power H3a is supported ( $p.008 < 0.05$ ) where the  $\beta = -.095$ , indicated a negative association between parent legitimate power and consumers' choice. On the other hand, H3b peer legitimate power is supported ( $p.021 < 0.05$ ) and a positive association was found where  $\beta = 0.087$ . Parent coercive power, H4a was not supported ( $p.0.165 > 0.05$ ), and there is no association between parent coercive power and consumers' choice as indicated by  $\beta = 0.065$ . Peer coercive power, H4b was supported ( $p=0.014 < 0.05$ ) and there is negative association with consumers' decision as indicated by  $\beta = -0.125$ . Parent reward power, H5a was supported where ( $p.0.032 < 0.05$ ), a positive association was found at  $\beta = 0.075$  between the parent reward power and consumers' choice. Finally, H5b, peer reward power was supported also ( $p=.040 < 0.05$ ) at  $\beta = 0.091$ .

## DISCUSSION

The aim of this study is to explore the influence of parents and peers on buying decisions for the young female consumers in Saudi Arabia, based on two landmark theories. Testing social power factors on buying choice which indicates a significant effect of peer expert power and parental expert power on the buying decisions



which shows no significant association. This result reflects the consumers' perception of their parents as low in experience. Female consumers believe that their parents don't have enough experience in buying choices. This is relatively true because of the new culture changes, and generation gaps support the previous studies (Goodrich & Mangleburg, 2010). Conversely, the high rating of peer expert power was at an average of 4-5, and the significant positive association explains the effect of peers as high experience on consumers' choice. The second type of social power dimensions is referent power which shows unexpected results, parental referent power has a significant negative association between parents and consumers' choice, which indicate that female refers to their parents, but often get affected with their choices negatively, as they do not see their parents as an expert of their own choice. High expectations from parents may cause poor relationships. Peer referent power indicates no association between peer referent power and consumers' choices. This reflects the level of importance of peer relationships in female consumers' life, while consumers perceive their peers as an expert, but they do not prefer to refer to them. This could be because of age similarities which supported the previous research (Childers & Rao, 1992).

Parents' legitimate power is significantly associated with consumers' buying choice but in a negative way. This reflects the perception of parents' legitimate power from young female consumers; also they may try to avoid punishment from their parents, as they have the right to influence their behavior; this led to some support from the previous study. Parenting pressures too can lead to a poor fit between consumers and their buying choice (Raines, 2003; Shevlin & Millar, 2006). Comparatively, peer legitimate power is positively supported, as young consumers tend to follow their peers and give them the legitimate right to influence their behavior. Coercive power is partially supported where parents' coercive power indicates no association between parents coercive power and young consumers' buying choice, which enhances the previous results for legitimate power. This association is related to the Saudi Arabia culture and lifestyle as young consumers live with their parents. At this age, they usually reject any influence on their behavior. The resulting support for peers' coercive power, consumers usually have the right to influence their peer behaviors, as they are afraid of peer punishment. The previous two types of power indicate the importance level of these two powers, and how culture and family relationships affect the young female consumers' behavior. Parents' and peer dominance powers can explain the significant associations with consumers buying choices; previous research also found an increase in parents and peer influence (Belch et al., 2005). On the other hand, Schooler et al. (2017) found that the stability of personality characteristics can be less in countries where the cultural or economic changes are greater than in those that do not.

The last type of social power which is reward power is supported, there is a positive association between parent reward power and consumers buying decisions. Consumers usually rely heavily on their parents and expect a reward from them when they do what their parents want. On the other hand, peer reward power indicates a positive association with consumers' choices because consumers who are in the same age and income level expect reward and benefit from doing the thing that peers want. The influence of parental powers changes in different cultures which are usually formed by contextual sources (Ordóñez, 2009).

## CONCLUSION

The existence of peer/parents influence on young female consumers' choices in Saudi Arabia is strong using the bases of social power. Therefore, this study put more light on consumers' behavior area and how parents/peers influence decisions.

## Implication

This study extends its research on social power bases by examining their effects on consumer decisions, although the study has not been previously evaluated. However, the practitioners should take the overall importance of parental social power into consideration; that suggests marketers have focused on the role of peers and parents in consumers' decisions. From a methodological perspective, the findings explain the social

comparison that may impact the organizational structure by focusing on the informal relations with peers. Having an insight on how young female consumers make their decisions can guide them more to be realistic in choice.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The research studies which show the influence of family and parents on buying behavior should be the spotlight for the development and establishment of close relationships in a cultural context, especially the concept of authoritativeness (Leung et al., 2010). More studies should be conducted to compare consumers' behaviors for a different period, to understand the changes in their choices from time to time in both genders. This study suggests the development of a new role in parent's involvement; it also focuses on the family system and relationship in groups to become more proactive.

## Limitations

The current study sheds some light on the complexity of consumers' buying behavior, although with some limitations. Consumers' characteristics were not included in the study, but the focus of the study was only on the peer and parent influence without taking status (income, education level, age, occupation) into consideration. Also, consumers' values and priorities can change over time, as they become more matured and more experienced with their basic and future needs.

## Further research

There is a need to conduct future research among various groups of young adults and teenagers like high school students or college graduates who often encounter the challenges of buying decisions. Also, we encourage future studies to investigate additional variables that may have an influence on consumers buying decisions. The influence of culture on decisions can be an extended study for the present study. Parents' status (education, income, occupation, age) could be studied in the future, to illustrate more about consumers' decisions. It is also good for future research to study peer characteristics, as it is found to possess an influence on the consumers' choices. Parents' involvement is an additional issue which must be addressed in future studies. Parents and peer pressure are one of the most important factors that need to be studied due to its massive impact on consumer behavior.

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