



## THE INVESTIGATION-BASED LITERATURE ON THE REFERENCE GROUP AND BUYING INTENTION

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### Abstract

Buying intention is a central construct in consumer behavior research because it bridges attitudes and the likelihood of action in markets. One of the most influential determinants of buying intention is the reference group—individuals or collectives that consumers use as a benchmark for beliefs, evaluations, and behaviors. This investigation-based literature review synthesizes theory and evidence on how reference groups shape consumer buying intention through mechanisms such as normative influence (pressures to comply), informational influence (belief formation via credible others), value internalization, and identity signaling. Drawing primarily on foundational perspectives from social psychology, consumer socialization, and marketing science, the review connects reference-group effects to established explanatory models including the Theory of Planned Behavior, Social Comparison Theory, and Self-Concept theories. It also integrates more recent developments such as online social influence and platform-mediated word-of-mouth, where visibility, algorithmic curation, and network dynamics alter how social cues are interpreted. Methodologically, the paper emphasizes an “investigation-based” approach: mapping constructs to testable propositions, contrasting causal pathways, and consolidating measurement strategies used in prior empirical studies. The review concludes that buying intention is shaped not only by whether consumers are influenced, but by how, when, and under what conditions influence becomes salient—particularly depending on product type, consumer involvement, cultural context, and trust in the reference source. The paper provides a research agenda for future experimental and longitudinal designs to refine causal inference.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

In modern markets, consumers rarely evaluate products in isolation. Instead, they interpret brands, prices, and quality through social cues: friends' recommendations, family traditions, peer reviews, influencer content, and community norms. The concept of the reference group captures this social benchmark function. Reference groups can be formal (e.g., professional communities), informal (e.g., close friends), aspirational (e.g., role models), or digital (e.g., follower networks and review communities). Reference group research has long argued that individuals use others as standards for evaluation and behavioral guidance. In consumer contexts, this becomes particularly consequential because purchasing is often a high-importance decision involving risk, identity expression, and uncertainty. At the same time, buying intention remains a key behavioral antecedent in marketing and management research. Many theoretical frameworks treat intention as a direct predictor of behavior: consumers form intentions based on attitudes, perceived control, and normative considerations. Therefore, reference groups are not merely “background influences”—they can be structurally embedded in the formation of intention, shaping both what consumers think is desirable and what they believe others expect them to do.



Moreover, this study aims to provide an investigation-based literature synthesis on the relationship between the reference group and buying intention. Specifically, (1) it integrates theoretical foundations explaining reference-group effects on intention; (2) it reviews empirical studies and common research designs that test these relationships; (3) it distinguishes major mechanisms (normative, informational, identity/values, and trust-based processes); (4) it summarizes measurement approaches and their implications for construct validity; and (5) it proposes a structured analysis framework and a research agenda emphasizing testable propositions and stronger causal designs.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Classic consumer behavior theory emphasizes that reference groups serve as normative and comparative benchmarks. Normative influence occurs when individuals feel pressure to comply with expectations from significant others. Informational influence occurs when individuals rely on others' judgments as signals about product attributes, quality, or value, especially under uncertainty. This duality aligns with broader work in social psychology and marketing, where interpersonal cues affect beliefs and behavior through compliance pressures and belief updating. The reference group thus becomes a social mechanism for reducing ambiguity: consumers use others to infer what is appropriate or correct. Furthermore, social Comparison Theory suggests individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate their opinions and abilities. In consumer contexts, such comparisons can shape how consumers interpret product meaning and quality. For example, if a peer group values "environmental sustainability," consumers may update their beliefs about what brands are "good," and this can translate into higher purchase intention. Importantly, social comparison is not uniformly passive. It can be motivated by uncertainty, the desire for accuracy, or the desire for self-enhancement and belonging. These motives condition how reference groups affect intention.

Buying is also an identity-related act. Consumers often purchase products not only for functional utility, but for symbolic expression. Self-concept frameworks suggest that consumers align consumption choices with their desired identity. Reference groups provide identity cues—both descriptive (what others do) and prescriptive (what others value). Over time, consumers internalize group norms and values, making intention not merely reactive but increasingly self-consistent. Thus, reference-group effects may operate through identity congruence: consumers buy when the product is perceived as consistent with the identity they want to portray and the identity others expect them to maintain.

### Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

The Theory of Planned Behavior posits that intention is influenced by: (a) Attitude toward the behavior (evaluation of outcomes); (b) Subjective norms (perceived social pressure); and (c) Perceived behavioral control (perceived ease or constraints). Reference groups map directly onto subjective norms and sometimes into perceived behavioral control through social learning and resource provision. If consumers believe significant others expect them to purchase, intention increases. Additionally, if reference groups share experiences that improve perceived ability (e.g., how easy it is to buy online, return policies), perceived control may rise, strengthening intention. Although TPB does not use the term "reference group" explicitly, it operationalizes the social influence pathway through subjective norms, which conceptually overlaps with reference-group influence.

Subsequently, beyond TPB, marketing research has developed models emphasizing susceptibility to interpersonal influence—the tendency to rely on others when making decisions. This aligns with reference-group mechanisms: highly susceptible consumers interpret social cues as credible and relevant, which amplifies the effect of reference-group opinions on intention. Susceptibility is not static. It can vary by situation (product

risk, novelty), demographic characteristics, and personal traits (need for approval, social anxiety, collectivistic orientation).

A major challenge in the literature is that researchers often measure related but non-identical constructs. Common measurement categories include:

- Subjective norms (aligning with TPB): belief that significant others think one should purchase.
- Peer influence / friends' influence: social cues from peers.
- Susceptibility to interpersonal influence: general or situation-specific tendency to be influenced.
- Normative social influence: pressure and expectations.
- Informational social influence: informational value of others' opinions.
- E-WOM and review credibility: online reference group information quality and trust.

A strong investigation-based review treats these as related constructs but requires mapping them to mechanisms:

- subjective norms ⇔ normative influence
- informational social influence ⇔ informational influence,
- susceptibility ⇔ processing willingness,
- identity signaling ⇔ value congruence.

### 3. METHODS

This study uses an investigation-based literature approach, meaning it does not simply summarize findings. Instead, it:

- a) Maps constructs to mechanisms. Reference group constructs are coded according to whether they primarily represent normative influence, informational influence, or identity/values processes.
- b) Extracts testable propositions. For each mechanism, the method formulates propositions that could be empirically tested (e.g., mediation hypotheses, interaction hypotheses).
- c) Evaluates measurement consistency. The method compares operationalization strategies and assesses construct validity risks.
- d) Identifies gaps for causal inference. It flags where designs make reverse causality or selection likely.

The data strategy (narrative but structured): Because this task is a writing assignment rather than a systematic review with a dataset, this paper synthesizes peer-reviewed literature and theory-based work in a structured narrative format rather than requiring a full PRISMA workflow. However, the conceptual coding follows a systematic logic:

- Stage A: Theoretical grounding—identify core mechanisms.
- Stage B: Empirical alignment—associate findings with mechanisms.
- Stage C: Moderators—identify conditions that intensify or attenuate effects.
- Stage D: Causal inference limits—identify design weaknesses.

As for the construct definitions for analytical coding, the reference group influence: (a) Social cues from individuals or collectives used as evaluative benchmarks; (b) Buying intention: self-reported likelihood or readiness to purchase in the near term; (c) Normative influence: expected social pressure/compliance; (d) Informational influence: reliance on others as evidence about product attributes; (e) Identity signaling/value congruence: perception that consumption aligns with identity and group values; and (f) Trust/credibility: perceived reliability of the reference source.

The proposed analytical framework (conceptual model) of this study is from the following relationships are used as a conceptual template for the discussion, namely:

- a) Reference group influence → Buying intention
- b) Mediation paths:
  - Reference group → Normative pressure → Intention
  - Reference group → Informational beliefs → Intention
  - Reference group → Identity congruence/values → Intention
- c) Moderation:
  - Product visibility/involvement
  - Trust in reference source
  - Consumer susceptibility
  - Cultural orientation

### **Ethical Considerations**

Entrepreneurship-related outcomes can include sensitive information about business failures or informal operations. Ethics procedures must ensure confidentiality, voluntary participation, and careful handling of financially sensitive narratives.

## **4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

A central insight emerging from the literature is that reference groups influence buying intention through multiple, partially separable pathways.

### **Normative Pathway: Compliance and Anticipated Evaluation**

In normative influence, buying becomes a social action aligned with what one believes others expect. This can be formalized as a pathway consistent with subjective norms in TPB. When reference group expectations are salient, intention increases—especially when: the purchase is visible, the consumer strongly identifies with the group, and reputational consequences are meaningful.

### **Visibility, Social Risk, Trust, Source Credibility, Consumer Susceptibility**

Reference groups exert stronger effects when consumers anticipate that their purchase will be evaluated by others. Public goods (fashion, gadgets, lifestyle services) heighten normative pressure. Private goods (personal healthcare tools, household utilities) can still be affected by informational influence (reviews, expert opinions), but normative influence often declines. Thus, a key prediction is: normative influence moderates more strongly than informational influence by public visibility. Moreover, in both offline and online environments, credibility acts as a gating mechanism. Consumers are less likely to accept influence from sources perceived as biased, non-expert, or overly commercial. Online environments complicate credibility because influencer content may combine entertainment, persuasion, and advertising. Therefore, reference group effects should strengthen when: the reference source is perceived as authentic, the consumer perceives expertise or similarity, and the consumer detects consistent information cues (e.g., repeated reviews, coherent narratives). Susceptibility to interpersonal influence represents an individual-differences moderator. Two consumers can receive identical reference cues, but interpret them differently based on: need for approval, prior knowledge, and reliance on others for decision-making.

### **Online Reference Groups: Platform-Mediated Social Influence**

Digital ecosystems have shifted how reference groups function:

- Distance and abundance: consumers can access many opinions beyond their immediate circle.
- Visibility metrics: popularity indicators (likes, views, number of reviews) function as indirect cues.

- Algorithmic exposure: the content a consumer sees is filtered, potentially creating “echo-like” networks.
- Parasocial cues: influencer relationships can produce emotional involvement, affecting persuasion.

These features imply that reference-group-to-intention effects in online settings may be driven by: (1) credibility signals embedded in platform architecture; (2) identity and community belonging; and (3) social proof interpretation. However, causal claims are complicated by selection effects: consumers with strong tastes may follow specific creators and thus appear more influenced. Moreover, an investigation-based reading therefore recommends stronger research designs in online contexts, including experiments manipulating review valence or influencer credibility, and longitudinal designs capturing exposure history.

### **Methodological Reflection: Construct Validity and Causal Inference**

Many studies use different terms for related constructs. If researchers treat subjective norms, eWOM credibility, and susceptibility to interpersonal influence as interchangeable, they risk conflating distinct mechanisms:

- a) subjective norms emphasize pressure, eWOM credibility emphasizes evidence, and susceptibility emphasizes processing tendency.
- b) An investigation-based approach suggests coding them into mechanism-aligned categories and testing mediation models to identify the pathway that actually leads to buying intention.

### **Cross-Sectional Biases**

When studies rely on cross-sectional survey data, reverse causality is plausible. For instance: people who already intend to buy may pay more attention to reference sources, or their intention may shape their social network engagement. Thus, future work should prioritize: experiments (e.g., manipulating reference cues), panel data (e.g., intention over time), and structural models that reduce omitted-variable bias.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This investigation-based literature synthesis supports a multi-mechanism account of how reference groups influence buying intention. Reference group effects are best understood not as a single homogeneous influence, but as the joint operation of:

- Normative influence (compliance and anticipated social evaluation),
- Informational influence (belief updating under uncertainty, moderated by credibility and expertise),
- Identity/values influence (symbolic alignment and value congruence that strengthen intention even when informational cues are weak).

The effects vary substantially depending on moderators including product visibility, consumer involvement, trust in the reference source, susceptibility to interpersonal influence, and cultural context. In digital settings, platform-mediated cues introduce additional mechanisms such as social proof metrics, parasocial persuasion, and algorithmic exposure—requiring careful measurement and designs that better support causal interpretation.

### **Research Agenda (Implications for Future Study)**

Joint modeling of mechanisms. Future empirical work should test normative and informational and identity pathways simultaneously using mediation and moderated mediation frameworks. Causal inference designs. Experimental manipulation of reference cues and longitudinal tracking of exposure-to-intention relationships can address endogeneity and selection. Improved construct alignment. Researchers should map

measurement items to explicit mechanism categories (pressure, evidence, identity congruence) to reduce construct validity issues. Platform-specific theory. Online reference group influence should be modeled with platform architecture in mind, including credibility indicators and exposure constraints. Overall, reference groups remain a powerful explanation of buying intention because purchasing is simultaneously a social, informational, and identity-driven act. A mechanism-first investigative approach can unify scattered findings into coherent theory and guide stronger empirical tests.

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