UNPACKING THE ROLE OF REFERENCE GROUPS IN SHAPING CONSUMER PURCHASE INTENTIONS WITHIN THE AUTOMOTIVE SECTOR

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of reference groups on the purchase intentions of Egyptian Automotive customers. The design and methodology of this research involve a survey questionnaire to collect data from a sample of Egyptian Automotive customers. The study examines the types of reference group influences, the roles within reference groups, and the impact of reference groups on buyer's purchase intentions. The findings indicate that reference groups have a significant effect on the purchase intentions of Egyptian Automotive customers. Moreover, normative influence is found to be the most influential type of reference group influence. The originality and value of this research lie in its contribution to the understanding of the Egyptian Automotive customer's purchase decision-making process and the influence of reference groups on this process. This study can benefit marketing practitioners in developing effective marketing strategies to target specific reference groups and increase their influence on the target market.

Keywords: Formal Reference Groups, Informal Reference Groups, Purchase Intentions, Automotive Market

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Introduction

Purchase intention is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors. The internal influential aspect can be divided into many elements that constitute parts of the buyer personality, such as perception, perceived value, motivation toward a certain product, self-esteem, and the learning amplitude. On the other hand, external influential aspect can include peers, members of the family, opinion leaders, and celebrities, in a manner, building up our reference groups.

Overtime, psychologists and sociologists emphasized that each individual in the society belongs to a specific group, and sociable reference groups that affect the individual's attitude and buying behavior. These Reference groups inspire individuals' predilection toward certain brands or set of products. For instance, individuals to be making purchasing resolution seek for the product, or brand that will reflect their belonging group.

Types of reference groups' influence varies between informational, normative, and value expressive influences. This depends on the buyer's tendency to mimic the members of his own social reference group, or members of some aspirational group that he wishes to be part of, or to share the same lifestyle. In the Automotive market, buyers tend to be more influenced by their reference groups because cars require high involvement of the consumer. Moreover, cars are apparent products that can be noted by the public easily. Thus, the buyer's purchase intention is being influenced in order to avoid sanction, or to gain recognition. Thus, this research investigates how the reference groups affect the buyer purchase intentions, which one of the different types of influence is considered as the most influential on the cars' buyer, and whether the reference groups still have the power of influencing the Egyptian Automotive customer purchase intentions nowadays.

Theoretical Framework

First, the theoretical framework determines what specifically the purchase intention is, and what the social factors that can affect it are. Then, the two major types of reference groups, formal and informal, will be identified. Finally, the theoretical framework will make its way toward investigating the variant reference groups sub- types', and how they can influence the buyer intentions to purchase via their different patterns of influence.

Purchase Intentions

Purchase intention is a sort of decision-making that identifies the purpose of buying a specific brand by customer. Purchase intention can be defined as the case in which consumer tends to buy a particular product in a specific situation. The preference of buyer to purchase a good or service is the

purchase intention. In another words, a consumer with an intention to purchase will do several evaluations before buying a product. Many forces influence the buyer's intention while choosing the product or brand, and the eventual resolution depends on buyers' intention with Varity of external factors. Amidst these external factors, a paramount one is the reference groups' influence (Rani, 2014).

The social group surrounding of the consumer affects his final decision of which brand to be selected. The choosing of a brand is usually based on the individual's reference group attachment to the brand. The individual considers that his reference group or some members of his reference group have rich information about the brand, which can make him to buy the same brand used by his reference group (Younus, Rasheed & Zia, 2015).

Evangelista, and Dioko (2011) added that the decision of purchase is the selection or preferring an option from two or more other alternatives. In purchasing decisions the customer is in situation whether to make the decision of buying or not. Cathy Macharis (2010) stated that the consumer decision to purchase a car is a multi- staged process as the car purchase implies a very high level of psychological or social involvement, mainly through five stages; problem recognition, information search, evaluation of alternatives, purchase decision and post purchase behavior.

Rani (2014) emphasized that the major factors that have impact on the consumer buying intentions are the reference groups, roles, aspirational groups, member groups, status, and family. This demonstrates that the external influences of other people on an individual's buying decisions can be direct or indirect. Social factors are considered amongst the factors that affect the consumer behavior in a paramount way. These social factors can be divided into three major categories, which are social roles, family, and reference groups.

Reference Groups

Reza and Valeecha (2013) defined reference groups as those whose rules, values, and basics are mimicked by an individual as ground of his everyday behavior. Persons seem to be under societal effect when they choose to pursue a decision of purchasing a product of a high value, and that requires high degree of involvement. In this case, automotive is an important area that witnesses a high degree of societal influence. Because automobiles are used to physically tour, and to be seen by peers and societal groups, reference groups have a powerful impact on the automotive buyer intentions to purchase and the decision-making process. Furthermore, young aged customers are enthusiastic about impressing others by singling out car brands that directly and positively mirror their personalities.

Lin, and Chen, (2009) added that a reference group is an accumulation

of individuals that we use as a standard of examination for ourselves paying little respect to whether they are a piece of that gathering. The consumers depend on reference groups to comprehend social standards, which at that point shape their qualities, thoughts, conduct, and appearance. The consumers additionally utilize them to assess the relative worth, attractive quality, or propriety of these things. The reference groups are shaped by individuals who have the want and ability to impart their insights and experience identified with their particular interests of themes and exercises.

The concept of a reference group is derived from sociology. Sociologists trust that our relationship to groups and to society everywhere shapes our individual musings and practices. How they identify with reference groups is integral to how social gatherings and society apply social power on us as people (Park & Cho, 2012).

Furthermore, Reference groups are a group or individual who act as a reference point in the beliefs, attitude, and behavior of an individual's formation. It acts as a key influence for an individual's building knowledge towards something. Reference group can be very small or it can be fairly large; influencing the consumer's behavior in different ways, indicating that person's reference group consists of either formal or informal groups influence on the person's behavior (Thomas, Jewell, and Wiggins, 2015).

Types of Reference Groups

Reference groups and membership groups

Rani (2014) stated that the membership groups are referred to as the social groups to which an individual belongs and will have impact over his behavior and attributes. This sort of groups is always associated with the social fountainhead, age, site of habitation, workplace, avocations, comfort, etc. However, reference groups have the paramount power to form an individual behavior and characteristics. The effect of reference groups alter across variant types of brands and products. For instance, if the product is recognizable such as a suit, a watch, a mobile device, or a vehicle, then the impact of reference groups will be significant.

Yap and Lee, (2014), added that marketers are interested just in the positive kind of membership gathering, additionally separate membership, and aspiration groups. Membership gathering can be additionally isolated into secondary or primary and informal or formal.

Formal Reference Groups

Formal type of reference groups is which was formally established and can be under the control of a particular organization. Formal reference groups encompass the opinion leader who can influence the psychological and behavior state of the consumer because of his rich knowledge, special expertise, or other attributes. In addition, to Brand communities and celebrity

endorsements who can influence the consumer psychological state. Hence, these formal reference groups have powerful impact on the consumer purchase intentions in a direct way (Escalas & Bettman, 2003).

Opoku (2012) added that primary formal groups have a more formal structure. The shopper usually is exposed to these groups. Promoters present membership in such groups as methods for winning item approval. Secondary formal groups are not critical to the buyer, as they meet occasionally, are organized, and are nearly knit. For example, graduated class groups, business clubs, and so forth.

Marketers are keen on studying the formal groups as they help in creating item features, tastes and preferences and furthermore specifically affect the buying behavior of a person. So the individuals from groups with the best contact in different situations will probably purchase similar brands (Yap & Lee, 2014).

Opinion Leaders

Chaudhry and Irshad (2013) stated that an opinion leader is an individual whose say is quite respected, and individuals apply the opinion leader's views toward their decision-making process across a series of different situations. In the automotive market, buyers perceive opinion leaders as trusted and informed persons who enrich them with trusty information in order to make the correct purchase decision. Almost each group has its own opinion leaders. On the other hand, it is not necessary to find opinion leaders within every social group; however, people may follow a person whose information is credible and trustworthy, such as cars' industry experts who exist on social media networks in the form of influencers.

Opinion leaders' major function is to monitor and examine the media, investigate the information they receive, and then delivering this information to circle of Akins, peers, or respondents. Opinion leaders are not only considered as medium of information transportation between the media and target segments, however, they act as very powerful influencers because of their significant social compression. Opinion leaders drive the consumer toward a specific choice, and then empower this choice with their social backup in order to reinforce it (Chaudhry & Irshad, 2013).

- Opinion Leaders as an Influential Source

Opinion leaders read more about cases related to consumers; they are more aware and knowledgeable about new product emergence, or enhancements; they often engage in consumer related events; they investigate each and every specific feature that a product offers; and they establish balances between perceived and actual values related to the product. Thus, Opinion leaders have a vast scope toward the market from two different angles, the customer's angle of view, and the seller's angle of view.

Opinion leaders designed a unique segment to themselves that can be isolated, and separated from ordinary consumers' dimension. Opinion leaders influence the buyer decision-making procedure as they perform as mediums of datum between overall audience and mass media. In other words, opinion leaders validate the tenor of mass media or mass communication and then pass it on to their group of peers, audiences, and relatives (Chakravarthy & Prasad, 2011).

Chaudhry and Irshad (2013) emphasized the paramount role that opinion leaders play in transferring data and information from media to target segments. This procedure takes place when opinion leaders are exposed to the marketing messages created by different companies and then they interpret these messages to deliver their final interpretation to the mass audience or their surrounding social groups. Hence, this determines how opinion leaders have significant power regarding affecting the mass audiences as they explicate the media messages in their personal ways.

- Opinion Leaders Effect on Buyer Decision Making Process:

Opinion leaders' paramount role is being activated whenever an individual intends to buy a product that requires high involvement behavior. This kind of products requires the consumer to proceed a proper evaluation in order to ensure that this product will fulfill his needs or wants. Others can affect the purchaser decision- making procedure such as colleagues, family members, peers, aspirational social groups, and celebrities. However, the opinion leader has a competitive edge over the other types of reference groups, which is the valuable word-of-mouth, provided by that individual; this will influence the decision-maker directly, especially if this opinion leader is trustworthy. Opinion leaders can provide both, a trustworthy recommendation and precise information about a specific product when they communicate with an adult consumer (Chakravarthy & Prasad, 2011).

Consumers could purchase a high involvement product based on the opinion leader's information and recommendations. Thus, opinion leaders play a paramount role in influencing the consumer's decision-making process through the information search stage. Upon the information they provide, the evaluation of alternatives stage will be influenced as well, because based on the opinion leaders' views the buyer will decide which brands will be added to the evoked set (Chakravarthy & Prasad, 2011).

Brand Communities:

Brand communities play a crucial role in influencing the buyer purchase intentions, as well as the perceptions, and attitudes toward a brand. Brand communities are places that can be physical or virtual, where people who marvel a specified brand communicate with each other as one group and share their daily experience with the brand. By degrees, brand communities

acquired more solicitude from marketing researchers and specialists. Inside brand communities, consumers play the role of brand's advocates deep within the community. Consumers share their everyday experience with the brand, as well as their interpersonal activities, lifestyle, and the way they spend their money. Thus, brand communities enrich the marketers with a paramount investigative spectrum, that aid, and unwrap understanding of the buyer purchase intentions (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014).

- Brand Communities and their impact on purchase intention

Zagila (2013) mentioned that according to social psychology, buyers who have purchase intention toward a specific brand are motivated to make a purchase in order to fulfill the need for identification with peers and groups in the same community.

Moreover, the integrated communication tools, language, brand identity, and codes that are used by consumers or members of the brand society stimulate the purchase intentions, and attract buyers, to be new members.

Habibi, Laroche, and Richard (2014) added that social capital notion emphasizes that buyers follow brand societies in order to acquire some sort of an economic value through interacting with the current members, and consumers inside a brand community. Thus, potential buyers, or those who have a purchase intention will choose a specific brand in order to acquire the utilitarian values presented by the brand, and shared by members of the community.

Zagila (2013) found that, the most robust motivation toward selecting a specific brand is that buyers get information about the product from consumers who exist in the brand community and use the same desired product. These consumers have the same values, and passions, thus the information acquired from them will be more credible, trustworthy, and authoritative than obtaining this information from other sources.

Celebrity Endorsement

Nowadays, promotions play a paramount role in accomplishing the organization's missions and long-term goals, especially in the automotive market field. The greatest improvement in the promotions field is involving a celebrity as an advertising tool. This in turn fosters the buyer purchase intention and motivates the buyers and consumers to acquire loyalty toward a specific brand. Marketers confirm that placing celebrities in their advertisements will establish a connection and unique linkage inside the consumers' minds between the celebrity used and the endorsed brand (Ahmed, Farooq, & Iqbal, 2014).

People perceive celebrities as a reference group that influences their purchase intentions and the whole purchase process. People are

convinced that purchasing a brand that is endorsed by a certain lovable celebrity will make them have the same lifestyle and values of that celebrity. Celebrities tend to have capability of boosting the customer's willingness to purchase the endorsed product (Ahmed, Farooq, & Iqbal, 2014).

- Celebrity Endorsement impact on Purchase Intentions and Decision:

Making Process:

Referring to section (2.2) reference group is the one that influences a person's behavior, attitudes, or values negatively or positively. Khan, Rukshar, and Shoaib (2016) stated that celebrities are well-known personalities who gratify tremendous public recognition by mass audiences.

The buyer's decision process is consisted of five major steps. First, is problem recognition, the step when the potential buyer becomes aware of the problem. Second, Information search; it is when the buyer encouraged to pursue a purchase decision. Third, Evaluation of alternatives, this is when the buyer compare between competitors who offer similar offerings. Fourth, the purchase stage where the buyer makes actual buy of the product. Fifth and lastly, post purchase stage, where the customer becomes a consumer who respond with feedback (Fathi & Kheiri, 2015).

Celebrities play a crucial role in influencing two from the above-mentioned steps, which can switch the whole decision process. Celebrities have a powerful impact on the buyer in the information search stage. In this stage, the customer can formulate a complete positive or negative perception that will stick in his mind, upon which celebrity is being used, and to what extent is the celebrity credible to him (Fathi & Kheiri, 2015). For instance, a potential consumer who is searching for information about a certain product, when he sees an advertisement that includes his loveable celebrity endorsing that specific product, subconsciously he will form a positive impression about this particular brand Following this step directly is evaluation of alternatives. This is the most critical stage in which a brand can construct a solid competitive edge through using celebrities' endorsements (Khan, Rukhsar, & Shoaib, 2016).

Informal Reference Groups

Informal group is called the primary group, which is not specifically having mission or structure, it involves mostly face to face interactions, as family and peer influencer groups by impacting many product behavior and have a large influence on the consumer behavior. The Formal group is called secondary group that have less or no face to face interaction, having mostly structure and mission such as known people in societies (Evangelista, and Dioko, 2011).

Family

The family is the strongest influencing factor for almost any person. A family forms a climate of socialization within which a person will incubate, develop his identity, and acquire values. Inside the family environment, an individual will establish attributes and opinions upon multiple matters such as social attachment, family interests, or his own desires (Rani, 2014).

Rani (2014) emphasized that the buyer behavior is robustly affected by the family element. Marketers deem this as a crucial problem, because more effort needs to be exerted in order to convince and influence the buyer's close family members who affect his purchase intentions. For instance, if the wife may influence the purchase decision of a specific product, hence marketers will attempt to indirectly target women in their promotional messages. One of the Marketers' major objectives is to influence the influencers in order to attract more base of potential customers toward their products (Reza & Valeecha, 2013).

Peers Pressure

Peer impact is fundamentally known as the extent to which peers can affect the behavior, attitudes, conceptions, and conducts of an individual. The role of peer influence on products purchases decisions. Varies across types of products, a publicly consumed necessity is a product that is observed when they are consumed and are not commonly owned (Opoku, 2012).

- Peer Influence on Product Purchase Decisions:

As a reference group, peers impact varies across the different types of brands and products. Over the past years, evidences and experiments had approved that the peer impact on the buyer is more powerful and significant when it comes at purchasing publicly used products, especially the luxurious ones, than for necessities products, which are privately consumed (Makgosa & Mohube, 2007).

Makgosa and Mohube (2007) mentioned that in the mid-nineties researchers found out that there was a significant equal peer influence on the luxurious products whether they are privately or publicly consumed. However, in the beginning of the twenty first century these findings and classic hypothesis were proven wrong. It has been approved that the buyer is under a weak peer influence when it comes to buying a luxurious privately used product. On the other hand, the impact of peers was found to be much more powerful on the buyer behavior when it comes to purchasing a publicly consumed product such as mobile devices, hand watches, clothes, and vehicles.

Ahmad, Yousif, Shabeer, and Imran (2014) stated that previous researches emphasized that peers cause a fundamental social pressure on

nearly all the customers. Friends and colleagues, through their everyday interactions with individuals, pass their behavior standards, values, views, and even norms to these individuals. Hence, individuals can replace their norms and lifestyles in order to go in parallel with their friends.

Aspirational Reference Groups

Inside the group, members compare themselves to those of another group based upon the assessment they apply on their behavior and attributes. Inside the reference group, persons are spontaneously allocated to a sub-group, whether an aspirational group or non-aspirational group. The aspirational group is categorized as one of the types of reference groups to which a person desires to join. On the other hand, a non-aspirational group is also one type of reference groups in which a person desires to liberate and disconnect himself or herself from it (Salmon, 2008).

Salmon (2008) stated that an individual's main objective when he/she joins to a group is either for self-verification, self-enhancement, or may be both. Being attached to a group can fulfill the one's need to be accepted, and recognized in a positive way by others. When the individual achieves this primary objective, he or she will be more attached to the group he belongs to, and thus, internalize the attributions and behaviors of this group.

Rani (2014) added that our reference groups influence the image we have of our attitude, as well as our behavior and ourselves. Reference groups usually change the buyer decisions, whether they are members of his own social group, or nonmembers. A group to which he does not have a membership in can influence a buyer. This type of reference groups is known as the aspirational group. Aspirational group is one that an individual wishes to have membership in. Thus, influencing his purchase intentions in a way that makes him purchase brands and products similar to those they use.

- Types of Aspirational Groups:

According to Yap & Lee, (2014) there are two kinds of Aspiration groups:

(a) Anticipatory aspiration groups are those gatherings, in which an individual intends to join at a future time and furthermore by and large he/she has direct contact.

(b) Symbolic aspiration groups are those gatherings, in which an individual is not probably going to have a place, although the acceptance of the gathering's behaviors and their opinions.

- Brand communities as aspirational reference groups:

A brand community is a specialized, non-geographically bounded society built upon an assembled chain of social relations among lovers and fans of a brand. Humans are humans; they will always feel the need to be connected

with those who share the same attitudes and sensations toward a brand. Brand communities offer the place where persons share consciousness, same standards, analogous life styles, and attachment to particular brand (Habibi, Laroche, & Richard, 2014). An Individual may wish to be part of a certain brand community. Thus, the preferable brand community's common rituals will replace the buyer's attitudes. This in turn will influence the buyer's purchase intentions toward specific brand (Younus, Rasheed & Zia, 2015).

- Aspirational Groups Impact on Purchase Intentions:

The aspirational group is considered as one of the reference groups' types that a person desires to belong and be connected to. Usually, the aspirational group is the reference group of another person whom someone considers dazzling or sensational. Within the aspirational group, there is a worthy amount of enchantment, or superiority that the outside persons wish to attribute to that group personality. For example, an employee in an international business organization recognized that his seven-icon earning colleagues are driving Mercedes Benz, Lexus, and BMW Vehicles.

On the other hand, he is currently driving an old Volkswagen. Hence, he desires to change his old car with one of the three models that his icon-colleagues are driving, in order to gain the social acceptance from them. Further, he wants to internalize their behavior in order to gain positive recognition reward from out-group persons and to attribute his aspirational group's prestige to himself. Thus, the moment that he can afford a luxury vehicle to acquire membership in the group, he can then belong to that aspirational group and enhance his self-distinguished identity (Salmon, 2008).

Furthermore, Escalas and Bettman (2013) found that individuals tend to choose to purchase the product or the brand that is being used by their aspirational group in order to fulfill their need of having a preferable image to themselves, and to people surrounding them. In addition, reference groups have a significant power, in nearly most of the cases, on affecting the customer's purchase resolution in order to enhance their self-identity.

Types of Reference Groups Influence

There are two schools of thoughts that illustrate the types of social influence resulted from the peers' social pressure. The first school of thought emphasized that the reference groups exert social impact that can be divided into three major types of influence, which are value-expressive influence, informational influence, and utilitarian influence. The second school of thought maintained that utilitarian and normative influence types are different, and they added the normative influence as a separate type (Makgosa & Mohube, 2007).

Informational Influence

The informational social impact has been comprehended as improving an individual understands of the environment and the power to stand up to the portion of environment. Further, informational impact also encompasses watching the behavior of another person's or actively seeking for datum from others with special expertise (Makgosa & Mohube, 2007).

Ahmad et al. (2014) added that when customers suffer a shortage of information about a specific product they might acquire knowledge and recommendation from their reference groups. The information acquired from reference group members is trustworthy, and accepted by individuals with a certain level of faith and dependability.

Li & Liu (2016) added that the acknowledgment of informational social impact relies upon the believability of the source. Customers are probably going to be impacted if the information is seen as upgrading their knowledge into the environment or their capacity to adapt to some part of it. Stok et al. (2011) stated that is, whether they trust it will help them to accomplish some objective, they will react.

Moreover, this type of influence based on the desire of making informed decision that is done using the behaviors and opinions of the reference group members as the standard information that will lead to the consumer's buying final decision.

Marketers may use it by direct certain information to the experts, leaders or the one who serve as reference points for a customer (Shukla, 2011).

Value-Expressive Influence

This influence makes people lucid themselves to the society in a sense that let them appear to be equal to the group they desire to be connected with. Under this influence, individuals pursue the group members' attributes and norms without paying attention to the benefits or punishments to be received, and determine to completely accept the lifestyle and view of this social group. In the automotive market, the value expressive impact is powerful than informative and normative impacts (Reza & Valeecha, 2013).

Makgosa and Mohube (2007) approved that Value expressive social impact refers to the person's interest and desire to develop, enhance, and improve his or her self- identity. Value expressive is probably influencing a person because of the interest to satisfy one's ego. This can be attained through self-connection to or self- disconnection from others.

Moreover, this type is characterized when person is in need of psychological association with a person or group reflecting the positions of their beliefs, values, attitudes, and lifestyle that is expressed by others. In this type, marketers should have a good understanding and experience with the key values of different types of reference groups and how they could influences the self-concepts of a customer (Shukla, 2011).

Normative Influence (Utilitarian Influence)

The normative social influence refers to the intention to go in meet the favorable expectations of others. The normative and informational influences have completely different core of impact. For instance, the informational social influence encompasses the message tenor, source trustfulness, and credibility. On the other hand admirable image, good social status, positive recognition are the fundamental elements of the normative influence (Makgosa & Mohube, 2007).

Reza and Valeecha (2013) added that when a person has a desire to meet a particular expectancy of a group, in order to be awarded with their compliment and glorification, this is a pure normative influence. Further, to obviate the punishment of being viewed in a negative way by the group. In order to sustain and strengthen their acceptability in the society, people strife.

Furthermore, this type of reference influence affects the customer's norms, attitude, and values through a direct interaction. It influences in general defined values or behavior of a person. For instance; parents, teachers or peers as for a child's normative reference group would be the family that play an important role in shaping his/her value and how to see the world (Credé, Bashshur, and Niehorster, 2010).

Scalici & Schulz (2017) added that this kind of influences leads customers to adjust on the grounds that they need to be enjoyed and accepted by other individuals. These kinds of social impact work in various ways. Yet, normative social impact occurs through the procedure of compliance. Hence, Normative impact happens when a man complies to saw desires of what others need with a specific end goal to accomplish remunerates or stay away from punishments. Item and additionally mark buys might be affected (Stok, et al., 2011).

Roles within a Reference Group

Members within reference groups have variable roles with variant intensity of influence, such as:

The initiator: Is the individual who makes the buyer cognizant of the problem. He stimulates the buyer toward looking for datum, by suggesting purchasing a particular good or service (Reza & Valeecha, 2013).

The influencer: Is the person whose recommendation or opinion is highly respected. Thus, it can influence the buyer's purchase intention. An influencer can be a person that does not exist within the buyer's social group, such as celebrities, or YouTube influencers (Rani, 2014).

The decision maker: Most of the times, the buyer is the decision maker. However, in some situations that require high involvement of the customer, an opinion leader may drive the buyer toward a certain product or brand (Rani, 2014). The Buyer: is the one who will pursue the genuine

purchasing of the product. Often, this individual would be the ultimate user. On the other hand, the buyer can be just the person who pays the money to purchase a certain product (Rani, 2014).

The impact of reference groups on buyer's purchase intentions

Reference groups in the marketing perspective are groups that serve as the main reference and guide for individuals in their purchase decision and building up information towards this product. It can also influence how the customer feels towards certain product or brands and therefore can affect the customer's purchasing decision towards such product. Multiple reference groups at any point of time can influence the individual (Schulz, 2015).

According to Thomas, Jewell, and Wiggins Johnson (2015) stated that, social groups could cause normative influence on the consumption decision of an individual including the product evaluations, likelihood of purchase, and the actual purchased behavior. Different items purchased by consumer based on the brand have been influenced by social groups. It also shows that it influences the degree of self- brand connection that formed between the individual and the brand.

Furthermore, the consumer's buying decision is to purchase the most preferred brand. There are elements that can affect the customer's purchasing decision such as the attitudes of others or beliefs and experience about the brand created by marketers. Sometimes to make buying decisions simple, customers can make mental shortcuts that can help them to take their perfect decisions. Particularly when limited problem solving happens before making a choice. These kinds of shortcuts can range from relevant thoughts and ideas like "higher price products are higher quality" or "buy the same brand which my friends have recommended" to specific "buy the same brand that my mother used to buy" (Zhao, et al., 2017).

The Research Hypotheses

H1: There is a relationship between formal reference groups and the consumer purchase intentions.
H2: There is a relationship between informal reference groups and the consumer purchase intentions.
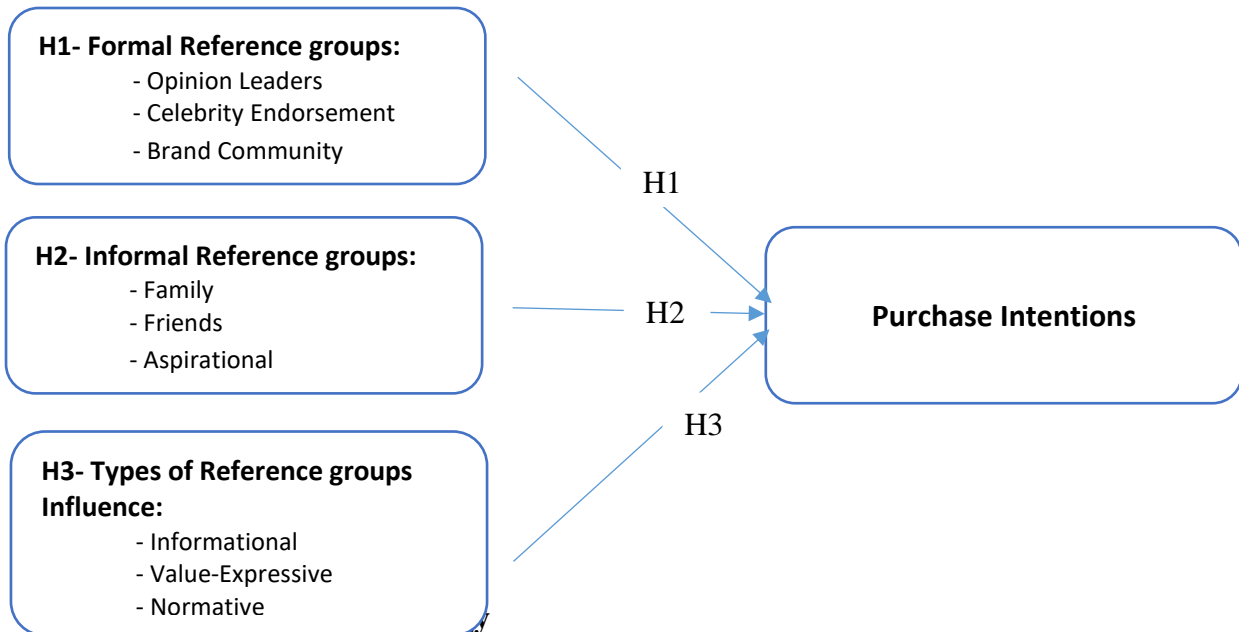H3: Each type of reference groups' influence has a different effect on the consumer purchase intentions.

H3 (A): Normative influence has a moderate relationship with the consumer purchase intention.
H3 (B): Informational influence is the most influential type.
H3 (C): Value-Expressive influence has a weak relationship with the customer purchase intention.

The Research Model

H1- Formal Reference groups:
- Opinion Leaders
- Celebrity Endorsement
- Brand Community

H2- Informal Reference groups:
- Family
- Friends
- Aspirational

H3- Types of Reference groups Influence:
- Informational
- Value-Expressive
- Normative

H1

H2

H3

Purchase Intentions

The research in hand is a quantitative research. According to Babbie (2010), a quantitative research, encompasses procedures that emphasize topical measurements and the numerical, mathematical, or statistical analysis of the data gathered by the researchers through questionnaires and surveys by utilizing computerized mechanisms. Quantitative research concentrates on collecting numerical datum, and propagating it across multiple groups of persons, as well as to demonstrate a specific phenomenon. Hanson and Grimmer (2005) stated that a quantitative research shows up a numerical exemplification of issues (variables) and endeavors to measure definite statements. Within this research, techniques as reliability and validity tests are utilized to defend generalizations and determine to what extent certainty has been achieved.

In order to build this conclusive research, researchers went through three major stages. First, the researchers began to explore and get more insights about the concept in hand by gathering data using confirmatory methods and exploring secondary sources of datum. The literature review have assisted the researchers in understanding the topic being studied by shedding the light on how the different types of reference groups can influence the purchase intentions of consumers, as well as the different types of influence

that reference groups can emit. Personal interviews were conducted with consumers and industry experts during the exploratory research, in order to add even more insights, and to demonstrate how reference groups can affect consumers and companies through collecting qualitative datum.

In order to acquire accurate, factual, and systematic data that can provide an actual picture of concept being reviewed, as well as to describe the characteristics of sampling units, the researches had to follow descriptive methods. Lambert and Lambert (2012) mentioned that the descriptive research method refers to the method used to describe data, characteristics, or function used to describe the population, to estimate the percentage of units in a specified population showing a certain behavior. There are three main purposes of descriptive research are to describe, explain, and validate findings. Description emerges following creative exploration, and serves to organize the findings in order to fit them with explanations, and then test or validate those explanations.

Because obtaining evidence of cause and effect (causal) relationships is considered the core of this research, the researchers have followed causal research method. Maxwell (2012) emphasized that Causal studies focus on an analysis of a situation or a specific problem to explain the patterns of relationships between variables. In addition, Causality research designs assist researchers in understanding why the world works the way it does through the process of proving a causal link between variables and by the process of eliminating other possibilities.

Methods of data collection

First, the researchers made a secondary research by exploring academic articles that are studying the same concept in hand, in order to expand their insights boundaries about the research topic. As indicated by Long-Sutehall, Sque, and Addington-Hall, (2010), the secondary research is about existing information through available sources. Moreover, Secondary data are used to get an initial understanding of the market. It is often faster to analyze than primary data because, in many cases, someone else may have already started analyzing it.

Then, the researchers have gathered primary data in order to insure fineness and reliability by using two methods, in-depth personal interviews conducted with customers and experts during the exploratory stage, and self-administered questionnaires. According to Driscoll (2011), primary research involves going directly to a source usually customers and prospective customers in your target market to ask questions and gather information. Examples of primary research are Interviews (telephone or face-to-face), Surveys (online or mail), Questionnaires (online or mail), Focus groups and Visits to competitors' locations.

In gathering quantitative data, self-administered questionnaire was the

major tool used by the researchers. Kim, et al. (2010) stated that a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ) refers to a questionnaire that has been designed specifically to be completed by a respondent without intervention of the researchers collecting the data. A SAQ is usually a stand-alone questionnaire though it can also be used in conjunction with other data collection modalities directed by a trained interviewer. Traditionally the SAQ has been distributed by mail or in person to large groups.

Within the self-administered questionnaire forum, nominal and Likert scale were used as major forms of tools to collect data from respondents. According to Musvoto and Gouws (2010), A Nominal Scale is a scale in which the numbers serve only as tags or labels to identify or classify the objects. In other words, the nominal scale of measurement deals only with non-numeric variables and there is no relative ordering of the categories, the numeric value assigned to each category is erratic. On the other hand, Likert scales are widely used to measure attitudes and opinions with a greater degree of nuance than a simple yes or no question. Moreover, Likert scales are survey questions that offer a range of answer options from one extreme attitude to another, like "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree." Typically, they include a moderate or neutral midpoint.

The questionnaire was originally established in English Language. However, the questionnaire was also translated into Arabic language because it was targeted toward Egyptian consumers who possess Arabic language as their main reading and writing language.

Population and Sampling

Research Population

The main population determined within the research encompassed any person who has intentions to purchase a vehicle, or any person who is a current vehicle owner.

Sample Size and Type

Sample size determination is the act of choosing the number of observations or respondents to include in a statistical sample. In this research, the sample size targeted by the researchers was 261 respondents. Moreover, the sampling technique followed by the researchers was the non-probability – Convenience Sampling method. Convenience involves collecting a sample from somewhere convenient to the researcher. Sometimes called accidental sampling, opportunity sampling, or grab sampling. Without relying on any subjective judgments, the researches have selected car owners, and those who intend to purchase a car.

Data Collection Process

There were 261 questionnaires conducted in different areas in

Cairo, Giza, and

Alexandria, including the following territories:
- Al-Mansour Showroom   (Sheikh Zayed)
- Al-Mansour Showroom   (Mohandessin)
- Al-Mansour Service Center   (5th Settlement)
- Al-Mansour Service Center   (Alex-Desert Road)
- Al-Mansour Showroom   (Alexandria)
- Al-Mansour Service Center   (Alexandria)
- Fawry Company   (SMART Village)
- IMPACT BBDO   (Zamalek)

Each researcher conducted from 60 to 121 Questionnaires. The questionnaire was conducted with different consumers with different characteristics, and in different locations in order to obtain as much data as possible, and to ensure the quality and reliability of the results.

Analysis and Hypotheses Testing
Demographics of Sample Units

Table (1): Characteristics of sample units

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage	Total
Gender:			
- Male	195	74.7%	261
- Female	66	25.3%	
Age:			
- Less than 30	125	47.9%	
- 30 to less than 40	81	31.0%	261
- 40 to less than 50	43	16.5%	
- 50 and above	12	4.6%	
Mean Age = 28			
Occupation:			
- Unemployed	50	19.2%	
- Public sector employee	20	7.7%	
- Private sector	145	55.6%	261
employee	36	13.8%	
- Business owner	10	3.8%	
Educational level:			
- Student	47	18.0%	
- Bachelor degree holder	176	67.4%	261
- Postgraduate	29	11.1%	
- Other	9	3.4%	

Monthly income:

- Less than 7,000 L.E	112	42.9%	
- 7,500 L.E to less than 10,000 L.E	65	24.9%	
- 10,500 L.E to less than 14,000 L.E	42	16.1%	261
- 15,000 L.E and more	42	16.1%	

Mean Income = 7,914 L.E

Table (1) indicates that the data was gathered from males and females. Males' percentage was 74.7%, while females' percentage was 25.3% of the sample. Hence, the percentage of males was significantly larger than that of females, as males are considered the primary decision makers or actual buyers of cars in most of the car purchasing situations.

Moreover, the majority of respondents' are between less than 30 to 40 years old, and a mean age of 28 years old.

More than 55% of the sample was private sector employees, followed by business owners, unemployed, and business owners.

A significant percentage of respondents was bachelor degree holders (67.4%), followed by students 18% and postgraduates 11.1%.

When it comes to monthly income, 42.9% of the respondents had an income of less than 7,000 L.E, followed by 7,500 L.E to less than 10,000 L.E wit a percentage of 24.9%, ten 10,500 L.E to less than 14,000 L.E 15,000 L.E and more than 15,000 L.E with a percentage of 16.1% to each one of them. The mean income was (7,914) L.E.

Testing the dependent variable (Purchase intentions)

Table (2) Participants with intentions to purchase a new car within the next four months

Intentions to purchase a new vehicle	
Yes	**No**
87	**174**

Table (3) Type of reference groups influencing consumers' purchase intentions toward cars

Type of Persons	Frequency	Percentage	Ranking
Opinion Leaders	72	27.6%	**2**
Brand Communities	22	8.4%	**4**
Celebrities	1	0.4%	**6**
Family members	91	34.9%	**1**
Peers	66	25.3%	**3**
Persons I wish to be like	9	3.4%	**5**

TOTAL	261

The above table shows that Family members are considered the most influential type of persons on the consumers' purchase intentions. Comes in the second place, are the opinion leaders who happen to be influencing about 28% of the entire sample. Then, peers also have shown an impact over the purchase intentions of 25.3% of the sample. Brand communities came in the fourth place, as they were influencing the purchase intentions of 8.4% of the entire sample. Aspirational persons had shown an impact over 3.4% only of the sample. At last came the celebrities with an impact over 0.4% of the sample.

Testing hypothesis one

H1: There is a relationship between formal reference groups and consumer purchase intention

Table (4) Influence of Formal reference groups (such as Brand communities, Opinion leaders, & Celebrities) on consumer purchase intentions

Type of Influence	Frequency	Ranking
1- Brand Preference	97	**2**
2- Willingness to buy	41	**4**
3- Evaluation of a certain car	141	**1**
4- None of the Above	43	**3**

(Hint: In Table 4 the No. of answers exceeds the No. of respondents as each one can select more than one answer)

Table (4) indicates that formal reference groups have an influence on the evaluation of a certain car for most of the respondents with a frequency of (141).

The Formal reference groups have also an influence on car brand preference for a large segment of the respondents with a frequency of (97).

No influence on any of the mentioned behaviors comes in the third place, as the formal reference groups did not have an impact over (41) of the respondents.

The least number of respondents chose willingness to buy with a frequency of (43).

Table (5) Opinion Leaders influence on consumers purchase intentions

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- I consider the recommendations provided by Opinion Leaders.	70 (26.8%)	122 (46.7%)	53 (20.3%)	12 (4.6%)	4 (1.5%)	261	3.93
2- I trust the information about provided by Opinion Leaders.	56 (21.5%)	109 (41.8%)	81 (31%)	10 (3.8%)	5 (1.9%)	261	3.77
3- I believe that opinion leaders have rich knowledge about cars.	109 (41.8%)	113 (43.3%)	32 (12.3%)	5 (1.9%)	2 (0.8%)	261	4.23
4- Opinion leaders can influence my car brand choice.	43 (16.5%)	70 (26.8%)	91 (34.9%)	42 (16.1%)	15 (5.7%)	261	3.32
5- Opinion leaders can reinforce my choice toward a certain car brand.	58 (22.2%)	110 (42.1%)	61 (23.4%)	22 (8.4%)	10 (3.8%)	261	3.70

Table (5) indicates that majority of the respondents agree and strongly agree that they consider the recommendations provided by opinion leaders with a mean of (3.93). Moreover, most of the respondents trust the information they obtain from opinion leaders about cars with a mean of (3.77). When it comes to the belief that opinion leaders have rich knowledge about cars, majority of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed on that belief with a mean of (4.23). The influence of opinion leaders on respondents' brand choice formulated a point of debate, because many of them were neutral with low

agreement, and a mean of (3.32). Respondents do consider the recommendations and trust the information provided by opinion leaders, however, this is not intensive enough to alter the respondents' entire brand choice process.

Lastly, most of the respondents agreed and strongly agreed that opinion leaders can reinforce the respondents' choice toward a certain car, with a mean of (3.70). Along the six statements, the disagreeing percentages among respondents were at a minimum compared with agreeing statements. This in turn indicates to how opinion leaders can reinforce, or influence the respondents' purchase intention.

The grand mean was (3.7), which indicates that respondents agreed on that opinion leaders do have an influence on them. Although, opinion leaders' influence might be indirect, and that respondents might rely more on their cognitive abilities, it was obvious that opinion leaders provide plenty of trusted information that respondents would take into consideration.

Table (6) Reliability of the statements measuring Opinion Leaders influence

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.802	5

Reliability refers to how much consistent the results of a particular element over a period of time and between different participants, when its measurements are repeated a number of times. If the association in reliability analysis is high, the scale yields consistent results and is therefore reliable (Larsson, 2015). Tavakol and Dennick (2012) added that there are several methods for computing a reliability test, one of them is by utilizing the Cronbach's Alpha. It is most commonly used when having multiple Likert questions in a survey/questionnaire that form a scale and need to determine if the scale is reliable or not. If the Cronbach's Alpha score exceeds 0.7, then the set of statements forming up a variable are reliable. On the other hand, if the result is below 0.7, then certain statements need to be added, or eliminated in order to escalate the Cronbach's Alpha score.

The researchers utilized Cronbach's Alpha to evaluate the reliability, and internal consistency, of a set of statements that leads to an overall indication of the reliability of entire variables. The results showed that the reliability was (0.802) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure opinion leaders' influence were reliable.

Table (7) Respondents' opinion of Celebrities influence on purchase intentions

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Total	Mean
1- I am more likely to purchase a car if a celebrity I like is supporting it.	8 (3.1%)	27 (10.3%)	45 (17.2%)	96 (36.8%)	85 (32.6%)	261	2.15
2- I believe that if a well-known celebrity is used in a car Advertisement, this car is of a good quality.	6 (2.3%)	44 (16.9%)	63 (24.1%)	89 (34.1%)	59 (22.6%)	261	2.42
3- Credibility of the celebrity can influence my choice of a certain car brand.	12 (4.6%)	25 (9.6%)	51 (19.5%)	94 (36%)	79 (30.3%)	261	2.22

In contrast to the opinion leaders, table (7) indicates that a significant percentage of the respondents along the three statements have chosen disagreeing answers. For instance, majority of the respondents disagreed that they may like a certain car if a celebrity is supporting it with a mean of (2.15). Moreover, most of the respondents disagreed that if a well-known celebrity is promoting a certain car, this car hence is of a good quality with a mean of (2.42). Lastly, majority of the respondents disagreed about how the credibility of a celebrity can influence their brand choice with a mean of (2.22). The agreeing answers where at a minimum compared with the disagreeing and neutral answers, which in turn indicates to the lack of celebrity influence over the respondents purchase intentions. The grand mean was (2.26) which indicate that respondents disagreed that celebrities can influence their purchase intentions.

Table (8) Reliability of the statements measuring celebrities influence on purchase intentions

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.731	3

The researchers utilized Cronbach's Alpha to evaluate the reliability, and internal consistency, of a set of statements that leads to an overall indication of the reliability of entire variables. The results showed that the

reliability was (0.731) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure Celebrities' influence were reliable.

Table (9) measuring respondents' familiarity with brand communities

Are you Familiar with brand communities?	
Yes	**No**
220	41

Table (10) Benefits provided by Brand Communities, prioritized by respondents

Type of Benefit	Frequency	Ranking
Economic Value	148	1
Daily Experience Shared	99	3
Activities Provided	35	5
Socialization	43	4
Knowledge Sharing	147	2
None	4	6
Other	4	

(Hint: In Table 10 the No. of answers exceeds the No. of respondents as each one can select more than one answer)

Table (10) shows how each of the benefits is important to each respondent, and what are the most important benefits that respondents can obtain from brand communities. Economic value and knowledge sharing benefits were at the top of respondents' answers with a frequency approaching 300. In the third place comes the daily experience shared by members, followed by socialization and activities provided benefits. The respondents who chose none of the benefits were significantly lower than those who chose other types of benefits, which emphasizes that in a way, benefits provided brand communities are important to consumers and play an important role in influencing their purchase intentions.

Table (11) Statements measuring respondents' attitude toward Brand Communities

Statements	Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree	Total	Mean
1. I feel a sense of belonging toward the online brand community.	25 (9.6%)	64 (24.5%)	75 (28.7%)	46 (17.6%)	10 (3.8%)	220	3.22
2. I believe that brand community members have rich information about the endorsed brand.	39 (14.9%)	98 (37.5%)	60 (23%)	20 (7.7%)	3 (1.1%)	220	3.68
3. I rely on the information provided by a certain brand community.	17 (6.5%)	53 (20.3%)	72 (27.6%)	60 (23%)	18 (6.9%)	220	2.96
4. I may purchase a specific car in order to share the same lifestyle of its brand community members.	10 (3.8%)	20 (7.7%)	50 (19.9%)	77 (29.5%)	61 (23.4%)	220	2.28
5. I believe that the information shared by the community members is credible.	22 (8.4%)	67 (25.7%)	106 (40.6%)	19 (7.3%)	6 (2.3%)	220	3.36
6. Brand Communities members can influence my choice.	11 (4.2%)	53 (20.3%)	61 (23.4%)	73 (28%)	22 (8.4%)	220	2.81

Table (11) emphasizes that majority of respondents feel a sense of belonging to a certain brand community with a mean of (3.22). Moreover, majority of the respondents believed that brand community members have rich information about the endorsed brand with a mean of (3.68).

Not a Significant proportion agreed that they rely on the information provided by brand community members with a mean of (2.96), while the others showed disagreeing and neutral opinions. This indicates that respondents do not encounter brand communities as their primary source of information. A minimum proportion agreed that they might purchase a certain car brand in order to share the same lifestyle of its brand community

members with a mean of (2.28), while the rest of respondents had neutral and disagreeing opinions about that issue. Less than half of respondents believed that the information shared by the brand community members is credible, which also indicates that respondents have a primary source of credible information other than the brand communities. Lastly, the respondents agreed that brand communities could influence their choice of a certain car were with a mean of (2.81).

Table (12) Reliability of statements measuring Respondents opinion about brand communities' influence

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.804	6

Cronbach's Alpha has been used in order to identify the reliability of statements regarding respondents' opinion about Brand communities' influence. The results showed that the reliability was (0.804) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure brand communities influence were reliable.

Table (13) Types of formal reference groups compared to each other

Grand Mean		
Opinion Leaders	Celebrities	Brand Communities
(3.7)	(2.26)	(3.05)

Table (13) indicates that there is a remarkable difference between opinion leaders, celebrities, and brand communities in terms of how they can affect the respondents purchase intentions and the respondents' attitude toward them as well. This table shows the consumer savviness, because the opinion leaders' highest score emphasizes that respondents are becoming more perceptive because they refer to opinion leaders as an immersive source of information.

Table (14) Relationship between Opinion leaders and consumer purchase intentions (Correlations)

			Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Opinion leaders
Spearman's rho	Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.044
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.479
		N	261	261
	Opinion leaders	Correlation Coefficient	.044	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.479	.
		N	261	261

Table (15) Relationship between celebrity endorsed ads and consumer purchase intentions (Correlations)

			Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Celebrity Endorsement
Spearman's rho	Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.019
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.763
		N	261	261
	Celebrity Endorsement	Correlation Coefficient	.019	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.763	.
		N	261	261

Table (16) Relationship between brand communities and consumer purchase intentions (Correlations)

			Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Brand Communities
Spearman's rho	Do you intend to buy a car within the next four months?	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.077
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.257
		N	261	220
	Brand Communities	Correlation Coefficient	-.077	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.257	.

N	220	220

The previous three tables (14, 15, & 16) are showing that there is no relationship between opinion leaders, celebrity endorsements, and brand communities (Formal reference groups) and the consumer purchase intentions. However, referring to table (4), formal reference groups do have an influence on consumers' evaluation of cars.

Results of testing hypothesis One

Respondents are more likely to be utilizing formal reference groups as a source of information. Referring to table (4), a significant portion of the respondents showed that formal reference groups do have an effect on the respondents' evaluation of vehicles. The evaluation stage primarily encompasses searching for information to differentiate each car from the other.

Furthermore, referring to table (10), majority of the respondents prioritized knowledge sharing as an important benefit provided by brand communities; which indicates again that respondents seek information from formal reference groups. Hence, the results show that there is no direct relationship between formal reference groups, and the consumer purchase intentions. Instead, formal reference groups might be having a greater impact toward consumers' evaluation of a vehicle, due to their high informational influence.

Therefore, hypothesis one is partially accepted.

Managerial Implications

- First, the previous analysis of hypothesis one showed that celebrity endorsed car ads have nearly no impact over the respondents. Therefore, marketing departments within automotive companies should stop pumping money in celebrity-endorsed advertisements. Allocating huge budgets toward this sort of ads will force the companies to raise the vehicles' prices in order to reclaim these expenses. Automotive companies can eliminate these costs, and replace them with reductions and special discounts on the cars prices, which in turn might truly influence the customers purchase intentions.

- Second, Opinion leaders were found to be the second most influencing type of persons toward respondents, also it was found that they have greater influence than other types of formal reference groups. Hence, automotive marketing teams must give them a priority, and support them in many ways. For instance, always inviting them during new cars launching events, providing them these new cars in order to let them test-drive these cars, and publish the reviews to their followers, this will make opinion leaders support the new car, and mention in their reviews all of the features packages within the car.

- When it comes to purchasing a vehicle, buyers seek pieces of information adapted to their situation, where outside noises fade away. Hence, automotive companies must have an eye, be existed, and have a sort of hidden, yet significant, control over the major sources of information, including brand communities. Marketing teams must supply online brand community members with electronic user manuals, and interactive vehicle brochures, in order for admins to share these information with all other members of the community. Making sufficient information about the current vehicle owned by an individual or a new vehicle, available in the zones that a buyer would refer to primarily, will not make the buyer refer to outside sources that might be misleading, or biased toward a competitive vehicle.

- Economic value provided by brand communities, was the most important benefit highlighted by respondents. Therefore, automotive companies must start constructing immersive loyalty programs for their brand community members. Companies must announce within the brand communities about special discounts on spare parts and accessories prices, on a periodic basis.

Testing hypothesis two

H2: There is a relationship between informal reference groups and customer purchase intentions

Table (17) Influence of Informal Reference Groups such as (Family members, Peers, and aspirational persons) on customer purchase intentions

Type of Influence	Frequency	Rank
1- Brand Preference	141	1
2- Willingness to buy	71	3
3- Evaluation of certain car	86	2
4- None of the above	23	4

(Hint: In Table 17 the No. of responses is bigger than No. of respondents as each one can select more than one answer)

This table indicates that informal reference groups have an influence on the brand preference for most of the respondents with a frequency of (141).

The informal reference groups have also an influence on evaluation of certain car on a large segment of the respondents with a frequency of (86).

Willingness to buy comes in the third place as the informal reference group can influence the respondents' willingness to buy with (71).

The least number of respondents chose none of the above with a frequency of (23).

Table (18) Informal Reference Group

Statements	Strongly Disagre	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (2)	Strongly Agree	Total	Mean
1. Before purchasing a car, I seek information about specific car from my	8 (3.1%)	14 (5.4%)	42 (16.1%)	99 (37.9%)	98 (37.5%)	261	4.05
2. Before purchasing a car, I depend on my friends' experience about car	1 (0.4%)	5 (1.9%)	28 (10.7%)	112 (42.9%)	115 (44.1%)	261	4.13
3. My friends can influence my car brand	8 (3.1%)	18 (6.9%)	66 (25.3%)	108 (41.4%)	61 (23.4%)	261	3.72
4. If I want to be like my colleagues, I will buy the same car brand they have	55 (21.1%)	85 (32.6%)	64 (24.5%)	40 (15.3%)	17 (6.5%)	261	2.35

The above table indicates that the majority of the consumers seek information about the car they intend to buy, from their families, before making the final purchasing decision. The mean was (4.05)

The majority of the consumers were neutral to their friends' experience about car brands with mean (3.05) and (3.13).

While the third statements indicates that, the majority of consumers are agree when it comes to their friends' influence on their brand choice, with a mean of (3.72).

Moreover, the last statements indicates that the majority of the consumers disagree that they will buy the same car brand that their colleagues, with a mean of (2.35).

Grand mean of the statements measuring respondents opinion about Informal reference with (3.64) that the consumer are agreed on, that the majority of consumers when they purchase a car they influenced by their family, friends and peers.

Table (19) Reliability of statements measuring respondents' opinion about Informal reference groups' influence

Reliability Statistics	
Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.626	4

Cronbach's Alpha has been used in order to identify the reliability of statements regarding respondents' opinion about Brand communities' influence. The results showed that the reliability was (0.626) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure informal reference groups influence were reliable.

Results of testing hypothesis Two

The previous analysis of hypothesis two showed that the informal reference group highly to be a source of information to the respondents, as indicated by table (3) majority of respondents selected informal reference groups to be influencing their purchase intentions toward cars more than formal reference groups. Referring to table (18), the most effective source on the respondents while purchasing a car showed to be the friends' experience about the brand of the car needed to be purchased by the respondents and their influence shows the highest impact on the respondents compared to the influence of other types of the informal reference groups and other factors.

Additionally, the informal reference groups influence on the brand preference to the most of the respondents. As shown in table (17), the brand preference shows the highest frequency compared to other factors that influence the purchasing intention of the respondents as willing to buy, evaluation of certain car and other factors affecting their purchasing intention. While the other factors as the influence of the evaluation of certain cars shows the second high frequency to influence the purchasing intention of the respondents.

Finally, it is proved that there is a high majority agreement on that the informal reference group including the family, parents in particular and friends, are considered the most important influencers on customers towards their purchasing intentions and willing to buy specific car brand.
The previous hypothesis two is accepted.

Managerial Implication

The hypothesis shows that the informal reference groups including family, peers and aspirational having a high impact on the purchasing intention of the respondents. For instance, marketers can use this type of informal reference group in marketing activities such as providing loyalty programs in order to increase their trust and loyal to the car brand through sales promotion for example if more than one in the family members having a certain brand

they take 20% instead of 10% as they are loyal for the brand. Also choosing a way to communicate with them in an easy and reachable way for instance through using booths in public places that are visited by all family members such as malls in order to inform all the family members with the needed information towards a specific brand through catalogues about this car brand and through the information from the sales person.

In another way, can use the family in their advertisings as the family is personally persuasive because families make buying decisions together as a unit. To target that person who affects majority of buying, decisions in advertising, referencing their location within the family and their responsibility to make purchasing decisions for the family, will be more profitable than targeting others.

The second type of the reference group who have a high impact on the purchasing intention of the respondents are the friends. Hence, individuals can replace their norms and lifestyles in order to go in parallel with their friends. Therefore marketers have to put this factor in consideration while targeting their customers. For instance, they could make an online evaluation which includes the preferences of the buyers toward specific car brand through questions and is accessed by others in order to gain more information about this car brand and they will follow their evaluation toward specific brand.

Testing hypothesis three

H3: Each Type of reference groups' influence has a different effect on the consumer purchase intentions

H3 (A): Normative influence has a moderate relationship with the consumer purchase intentions

Table (20) Statements measuring respondents' receptivity to normative reference group type of influence

Statements	Strongly	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (2)	Strongly	Total	Mean
1. It is important that others, (such as Family	17 (6.5%)	42 (16.1%)	57 (21.8%)	77 (29.5%)	68 (26.1%)	261	4.36
2. I care about the kind of friends'	21 (8.0%)	32 (12.3%)	62 (23.8%)	109 (41.8%)	37 (14.2%)	261	4.06
3. When purchasing a new car, I	25 (9.6%)	49 (18.8%)	55 (21.1%)	102 (39.1%)	30 (11.5%)	261	3.90
4. I may prefer a specific car brand in order	46 (17.6%)	62 (23.8%)	68 (26.1%)	66 (25.3%)	19 (7.3%)	261	3.74

Table (20) shows that the majority of respondents agreed that they care about their friends or family members liking of the car brand that they intend to purchase with a mean of (4.36), the majority strongly agreed that they care about the kind of their friends' reactions towards the car that they will buy with a mean of (4.6), and they agreed too that when they purchase a new car, they will purchase the one which will be accepted by their friends or family members with a mean of (3.90). The majority of respondents are neutral that they may prefer a specific car brand in order to avoid their friends or family members' sarcasm, and the mean is (3.74). And the Grand Mean is (3.20). This indicates that there is a difference between Normative Influence, Informational Influence and Value Expressive Influence, in terms of how they can affect the respondents purchase intentions and the respondents' attitude by them as well. This number means that the majority of respondents slightly agreed that their purchase intentions are affected by others.

Table (21) Reliability of statements measuring normative reference groups' type of influence

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.844	4

Table (21) shows that the reliability is (0.844) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure Normative Influence were reliable.

Table (22) Relationship between Normative Influence and Informal Reference Groups (Correlations)

			Informal RG	Normative Influence
Spearman's rho	Informal RG	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.475**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.257
		N	261	261
	Normative Influence	Correlation Coefficient	.475**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	261	261

(Hint: ** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level 2-tailed)

This table shows that there is a relationship between Normative Influence of reference groups and Informal Reference Groups because the number of Sig. (2- tailed) is (.000). This Relationship is Moderate (.475), which means that the respondents are affected by Informal Reference Groups

and the type of this effect is Normative Influence.

H3 (B): Informational influence is the most influential type

Table (23) Statements measuring respondents' receptivity to informational reference group type of influence

Statements	Strongly Disagre	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (2)	Strongly Agree	Total	Mea
1. Before buying a car, I frequently gather information from others about it (such as family members and	3 (1.1%)	2 (0.8%)	24 (9.2%)	98 (37.5%)	134 (51.3%)	261	4.73
2. I may prefer a specific brand according to the credibility of the source of information.	3 (1.1%)	4 (1.5%)	20 (7.7%)	93 (35.6%)	141 (54.0%)	261	4.85
3. I may prefer a specific brand according to the amount of the	2 (0.8%)	8 (3.1%)	27 (10.3%)	97 (37.2%)	127 (48.7%)	261	4.90

This table shows that the majority of respondents strongly agree that they gather information from others such as family members, and opinion leaders before buying a new car, and the mean is (4.73), they are strongly agreed too that they prefer a specific car brand according to the credibility of the source of information with a mean of (4.85), they are also strongly agreed that they may prefer a specific brand according to the amount of information, and the mean is (4.90). Informational influence of reference groups is very strong when you compare it with the other two types, which are normative influence and Value Expressive influence. The Grand Mean equals (4.356), which means that the consumers are caring more to the amount of information and its credibility before taking their decision.

Table (24) Reliability of statements measuring Informational reference groups'
type of influence

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.663	3

The results showed that the reliability was (0.663) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure informational influence of reference groups were reliable.

Table (25) Relationship between Informational Influence and Opinion Leaders
(Correlations)

			Opinion Leaders	Informational Influence
Spearman's rho	Opinion Leaders	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.005
		N	261	261
	Informational Influence	Sig. (2-tailed)	.005	.
		N	261	261

(Hint: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level 2-tailed)

Table (25) shows that there is a relationship between Informational Influence of reference groups and Opinion Leaders, because the number of Sig. (2-tailed) is (.005). Referring to table (5) measuring opinion leaders' influence on consumers' purchase intentions, which indicated that opinion leaders provide plenty of trusted information that respondents consider when they evaluate between different vehicles. Table (5) and Table (25) manifest the relationship between informational type of influence and opinion leaders.

Table (26) Relationship between Informational Influence and Brand Communities
(Correlations)

			Brand Communities	Informational Influence
Spearman's rho	Brand Communities	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.013
		N	220	220
	Informational Influence	Sig. (2-tailed)	.013	.
		N	220	261

(Hint: Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level 2-tailed)

This table shows that there is a relationship between Informational

Influence of reference groups and Brand Communities, because the number of Sig. (2-tailed) is (.013). Referring to table (10) measuring how respondents prioritize the benefits provided by brand communities, which indicated that knowledge sharing was the second most important benefit consumers obtain from brand communities. Furthermore, referring to table (11) measuring the respondents' attitude brand communities, which indicated that majority of the respondents believed that brand community members have rich information about the endorsed vehicle. Hence, the way respondents prioritize and consider the information gathered from brand communities exhibits the relationship between informational type of influence and reference groups.

Table (27) Relationship between Informational Influence and Informal Reference Groups (Correlations)

			Informal RG	Informational Influence
Spearman's rho	Informal RG	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.347**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	261	261
	Informational Influence	Correlation Coefficient	.347**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	261	261

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

This table shows that there is a relationship between Informational Influence of reference groups and Informal Reference Groups because the number of Sig. (2- tailed) is (.000). This Relationship is Moderate (.347), which means that the respondents accepted that they are affected by Informal Reference Groups to collect more information, and the type of this effect is Informational Influence.

H3 (C): Value-Expressive influence has a weak relationship with the consumer purchase intentions

Table (28) Statements measuring respondents' receptivity to value-expressive reference group type of influence:

Statements	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (2)	Strongly Agree (5)	Total	Mean
1. If I want to be like someone, I will pursue his/her lifestyle.	66 (25.3%)	79 (30.3%)	61 (23.4%)	43 (16.5%)	12 (4.6%)	261	2.65
2. I may own a specific car similar to this of a person I really like.	37 (14.2%)	67 (25.7%)	70 (26.8%)	64 (24.5%)	23 (8.8%)	261	3.81
3. I may purchase a car brand similar to that of someone admired by others.	60 (23.0%)	86 (33.0%)	79 (30.3%)	26 (10.0%)	10 (3.8%)	261	2.61

Table (28) shows that most of respondents are disagreed that if they want to be like someone, they will pursue his/her lifestyle with a mean of (2.65). But the majority of respondents are neutral that they may own a specific car brand similar to this of a person who they really like with a mean of (3.81). The majority of respondents are disagreed that they may purchase a car brand similar to that of someone admired by others with a mean of (2.61). And the grand mean equals (2.57). Most of the respondents are between disagreed and neutral that they could have a purchase intention according to their ideal person, or to gain others' respect.

Table (29) Value Expressive Influence Reliability

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
0.799	3

The results showed that the reliability was (0.799) which in turn indicates that the statements used to measure informational influence of reference groups were reliable.

Table (30) Relationship between Value Expressive Influence and Celebrity Endorsement (Correlations)

			Celebrity Endorsement	Value Expressive Influence
Spearman's rho	Celebrity Endorsement	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.248**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	261	261
	Value Expressive Influence	Correlation Coefficient	.248**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	261	261

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table (30) shows that there is a relationship between Value Expressive Influence of reference groups and Celebrity Endorsement, because the number of Sig. (2-tailed) is (.000). This Relationship is Moderate with a correlation coefficient of (.248), this indicates that if respondents can identify themselves with celebrity endorsing a car brand, a value-expressive influence is more apt to take place and influence their purchase intentions.

Table (31) Relationship between Value Expressive and Informal Reference Groups (Correlations)

			Informal RG	Value Expressive Influence
Spearman's rho	Informal RG	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.359**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
		N	261	261
	Value Expressive Influence	Correlation Coefficient	.359**	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
		N	261	261

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table (31) shows that there is a relationship between Value Expressive Influence of reference groups and Informal Reference Groups because the number of Sig. (2- tailed) is (.000). This Relationship is Moderate with a coefficient of (.359), which means that the respondents accepted that they are

affected by Informal Reference Groups and want to own similar products to theirs. The type of this effect is Value Expressive Influence.

Table (32) Reference groups' types of influence compared to each other

Grand Mean		
Normative Influence	Informational Influence	Value Expressive Influence
(3.25)	(4.36)	(2.57)

Table (32) shows the grand mean of the three types of reference groups' influence. According to the research findings, the Informational Influence is the most type which the majority of respondents are affected by with a grand mean of (4.36). Which means that the consumers are caring more about the amount of information and its credibility before taking their decision. Then the Normative Influence comes in the second place with a grand mean of (3.25). Which means that the majority of respondents are slightly agreed that their purchase intentions are affected by others. Finally, Value Expressive Influence which is below average with a grand mean (2.57). Most of the respondents are between disagreed and neutral that they could have a purchase intention according to their ideal person, or to gain others' respect. Therefore, this proves that each type of influence affects consumers' purchase intentions with different intensity from the other types.

Results of testing hypothesis three

When it comes to purchasing a car, respondents are more likely to be influenced with the quantity, credibility, and source of the information they gather. The main findings have shown that each type of reference groups' influence affects consumers purchase intentions with varying intensities and in different ways. Informational influence was found to be the most dominant type of influence that affects consumers purchase intentions. For instance, opinion leaders were found to be emitting informational influence toward consumers. The same case can be applied on brand communities who tend to be affecting consumers' by an Informational influence through the information and knowledge shared by the members frequently.

Normative influence was found to be having a lower effect on consumers' purchase intentions than informational influence do. For instance, the findings indicate that respondents are more susceptible to normative influence from their families and friends only.

Finally, value expressive type of influence was found to be having the least influential power on consumers' purchase intentions. For instance, respondents tend be slightly apt to value-expressive influence emitted by celebrity endorsed ads.

Therefore, hypothesis three is accepted

H3 (A) is accepted. H3 (B) is accepted. H3 (C) is accepted.

Managerial Implications

Since there is a positive relationship between normative influence and informal reference groups, so for example, the marketers of automotive companies can establish new promotional programs for those who want to be viewed positively by their informal reference groups. For instance, the program might encompass special discounts for buyers whose one of their family members owns a car from the same brand, this might play an important role in stimulating the purchase intentions of those buyers whom are apt to normative influence.

Marketers of the company could focus on value expressive influence by making short live videos about some famous people who use their brand in their daily life (for example. Instagram Stories endorsed by public figures) in order to influence those who want to have a similar lifestyle or who want to share the same lifestyle of his/her idol.

Main Conclusion

The aim of this research was to measure the effect of reference groups' influence on the consumers purchase intentions by testing three different hypotheses. The area of application was the Egyptian Automotive sector. After testing the three hypotheses the following can be concluded;

From hypothesis one, which was targeted toward measuring the relationship between formal reference groups and consumer, purchase intentions, it was found that participants perceive formal reference groups as an immersive source of information they refer to wen buying a vehicle. Opinion leaders were considered as the most influential type of formal reference groups, because of their rich knowledge and information trustiness about the automotive market. As for celebrity endorsements, they had almost no influence over the consumer purchase intentions. Brand communities were also considered as a source of economic and informational values. The results have showed that formal reference groups affect consumer evaluation of vehicles. However, there was no direct relationship between formal reference groups and the purchase intentions of consumers, hence, hypothesis one (H1) was partially accepted.

Hypothesis two was measuring the relationship between informal reference groups and the consumer purchase intentions. Family members were the most influential type of persons that can influence the participants purchase intentions toward a certain vehicle. However, the research results revealed that there are other factors that can influence the consumer purchase intentions in

a more powerful way tan informal groups. Since, the results of testing hypothesis showed no direct relationship between informal reference groups and consumer purchase intentions, hypothesis two (H2) was accepted.

Hypothesis three was aimed to prove that each type of reference group influence has a different intensity of influence over the consumer purchase intentions. The results have shown that each type of reference groups emits different type of influence with different intensity toward consumer purchase intentions. Informational influence was the most intensive type of influence, followed by normative influence, and lastly value expressive type of influence. Hence, hypothesis three (H3), including its triple sub-hypotheses, is accepted.

Recommendations

- Marketing departments within automotive companies should stop investing millions of Egyptian pounds on producing celebrity endorsed ads for promoting their vehicles. Because it was revealed that participants do not trust what celebrities recommend in the ads, and they believe that celebrities are being paid in order to promote a vehicle.
- Marketing managers should start considering developing new marketing activities encompassing tools other than reference groups to stimulate customers' purchase intentions toward cars. For instance, offering price reductions, or special discounts on cars' price might be influencing customers' purchase intentions more than reference groups.
- Automotive marketing teams must support opinion leaders as a source of information. For instance, always inviting them during new cars launching events to educate them about the new cars, providing them these new cars in order to let them test-drive these cars, and publish the reviews to their followers. This will allow opinion leaders to speak fairly about the new vehicles and provide their followers authentic information that they can utilize during evaluating between different vehicles.
- Automotive companies' marketing teams must supply online brand community members with electronic user manuals, and interactive vehicle brochures, in order for admins to share these information with all other members of the community.
- Economic value provided by brand communities, was the most important benefit highlighted by respondents. Therefore, automotive companies must start constructing immersive loyalty programs for their brand community members. Companies must announce within the brand communities about special discounts on spare parts and accessories prices, on a periodic basis.

- Word of mouth marketing is one of the biggest drivers of revenue growth. Actually, the main influential power of reference groups is their word of mouth that can affect the customer purchase intentions. Hence, marketing managers of automotive companies can establish referral programs that will assist them to approach potential customers and turn them into their consumers. The marketing managers must encourage their happy customers to refer friends or family members to the referral program. An effective referral program to be applied for automotive industry might encompass the following ideas:

➢ Offering a 20% off referral incentive to existing customers who refer new users. When existing consumers refer a friend to the company or share a special referral program link with a friend, and the friend uses this to reserve a test drive or an appointment with one of the sales persons, both parties get benefits. For instance, current consumers get 20% off on spare parts, and new customers get 5% price discount when buying the vehicle.

➢ Ensuring that consumers will refer only those with true purchase intentions by offering them a 25% price discount on spare parts for their first 3 referrals. Then they would hit the next tier where they would earn extra 5% price discount on all sorts of spare parts for every approved referral after that.

The referral programs will allow an automotive company to obtain multiple benefits such as, establishing a solid and wide data base of potential consumers with true purchase intentions, adapt the promotional activities to meet potential customers' needs, and also increase current consumers' satisfaction and loyalty toward the brand, which in turn will help in spreading more positive word of mouth and generating a wider pool of referrals. Automotive companies can activate referral programs on seasonal bases, such as feasts, or even when celebrating a business milestone like anniversary.

The Research limitations and areas for future research

The research limitations

- Due to time constraints, the researchers have distributed questionnaires in specific areas only within Cairo, Giza, and Alexandria. This have prevented the researchers from collecting data from a greater variety of people.

Areas for further research

- Further research can focus on measuring the influence of product substances (Features, Price, Resale Value, etc.) on the consumer purchase intentions in the automotive market.
- Future researchers can measure the formal reference groups' impact on the consumers' evaluation of different brands.

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