

# Gender and Socioeconomic Class Differences in Susceptibility to Interpersonal Influence

Geetanjali Shrivastava



**Abstract:** *Susceptibility to interpersonal influence is a behavioral outcome of the consumer socialization process and can affect the consumers' purchasing decision-making process and buying behavior. There are three main antecedents to interpersonal influence on susceptibility, namely personal traits, age, and social structural variables. Factors like gender, socioeconomic class, family size, and race are considered social structural variables. This research was conducted to investigate the social structural (gender and socioeconomic class) differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence of the population of India. The data was collected through a set of online questionnaires. The research findings indicate that there is no gender or socioeconomic class differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence. However, when assessing each dimension of the scale separately, it was found that males are more susceptible to normative interpersonal influence than females.*

**Keywords:** *Gender, Socio-economic Class, Interpersonal Influence, Buying Behaviour, Normative Influence and Informational Influence.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

An individual's behaviour can be determined by other individuals' influence (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel, 1989)[1]. Social norms and interpersonal considerations can be found incorporated in models used to explain consumer behaviour and decision-making as determinants of consumer behavioural intentions (Ismail, 2011)[2]. The belief of social influence as a determinant of consumer behaviour is reflected in many advertising strategies including the use of endorsement by well-known attractive spokespersons, customer's testimonials and the depiction of merchandises being consumed in various social situations (Bearden et al., 1989) [1].

When studying consumer behaviour, susceptibility to interpersonal influence is hypothesized as an individual different variable that varies across individuals and has associations with other individual traits (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. Individuals who are willing to conform to a source in one context will be more likely to conform to other sources in other contexts (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. In relation to other

individual traits, susceptibility to interpersonal influence is negatively correlated to self-esteem; people who have low self-esteem tend to be more readily influenced by social norms and comply with peers' expectations to avoid social disapproval (Bearden et al., 1989)[1]. Susceptibility to interpersonal influence has also been linked to other traits including self-confidence, interpersonal confidence, and intelligence (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. Some people are unaffected by social influence while others are consistently adjusting to the social norms.

Aside from the associations to personal characteristics, the literature connecting social structural variables, especially gender, to interpersonal influence susceptibility is sparse and inconclusive. The primary objective of this research is to explore the gender and socioeconomic class of India's population and their relationships to susceptibility to interpersonal influence as social structure variables that are important antecedents to behavioural outcome in the consumer socialization process described by the social learning theory. This research aims to provide and expand the limits of knowledge relating to consumer decision-making process and buying behaviour of India's population.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Consumer socialization process

The development of consumer-related skills, knowledge and attitudes is referred to as consumer socialization; the process by which an individual is a passive partaker in the social learning process where cognitions and behaviours from social factors are obtained through modelling, reinforcement and social interaction (Moschis and Churchill, 1978)[4]. There are four main elements of the social learning approach: socialization agents, social structural variables, age (or life cycle position), and behavioural outcomes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978)[4]. Socialization agents are the sources of influence to the individual (Moschis and Churchill, 1978) [4]. Media, parents, peers and any other entity directly in contact with the learner are considered as socialization agents. Social structural variables, such as sex and socioeconomic class, define the social setting where the individual interacts with socializing agents (Moschis and Churchill, 1978) [4]. The socialization agents together with social structural variables are instrumental factors that can directly shape an individual's behaviors and attitudes (Moschis and Churchill, 1978) [4]. The third element is the outcome, the learned behavior and attitudes, which is often referred to as consumer skills (Ismail, 2011; Moschis and Churchill, 1978) [4].

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## B. Consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence

Deutsch and Gerard (1955)[5] addressed the susceptibility to interpersonal influence as a two-dimension operative that establishes through normative or informational influences depending on given contexts. Normative social influence is defined as an influence to conform to the positive expectations of other individuals (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) [5].

The susceptibility to normative social influence reflects the individual's value expressiveness, which is driven by the desire to boost self-image through referent identification and conform to the perceived positive expectations of others (Ismail, 2011)[2]. Another type of normative social influence, called utilitarian influence, operates through the process of compliance in which the individual conforms with the expectations of other individuals to gain reward or avoid punishment (Ismail, 2011)[2].

Informational social influence is defined as an influence to accept information from other individuals as a form of evidence about reality (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955) [5]. Searching for information from experienced individuals and forming inferences based on the observation of other individuals are the two approaches to informational social influences (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. Informational influence occurs, when information from other individuals adds on to that individual's knowledge about some aspect of the environment, through a process of internalization (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. The effects of informational social influence extend into consumer decision processes: purchasing decision-making and brand selection (Bearden et al., 1989) [1].

Since susceptibility to interpersonal influence is a multi-dimensional construct, its general traits are assumed to be multi-dimensional in that it manifests through many different ways (Bearden et al., 1989) [1]. Commonly found together, the two types of interpersonal influence can sometimes appear in opposite directions (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955).

## C. Gender differences

While there is little empirical support in persuasion and non-grouping conformity studies, group pressure conformity studies have shown evident trends of influenceability difference in the female direction (Eagly, 1978)[6]. Females were found to have the tendency to orient toward interpersonal goals in group settings to preserve positive social coherence and promote positive mindsets between group members (Eagly, 1978)[6]. Gender differences in influencing seem to exist in group pressure conformity settings: many real life situations (i.e., family, male monopolistic environment) feature gender role stereotypes and cultural contexts that form influencing agents which promote conformity in females (Eagly, 1978)[6].

Research in the area of gender differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence has been sparse and contradicting. There is a study suggesting that males tend to question their negotiation partners more compared to female, implying higher influence in males; while several other studies suggest that females reveal greater submissiveness than males through both verbal and non verbal behaviours (Ismail, 2011)[2]. Further, females have been found to exude stronger purchase motivations, implying higher susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Ismail, 2011)[2].

However, literature supporting gender differences and stereotypes may be subjected to the biases in role assignment (Eagly, 1978)[6]. The stereotype and gender roles that people hold against women, as being more submissive, more dependent, and powerless, may have investigators fallen prey to the observer's bias by attributing behaviour to personality traits rather than situational pressures (Eagly, 1978)[6].

## D. Socioeconomic class differences

Individuals can be categorized to fit into the social hierarchy as low, middle, high. Individuals in the same class are the individuals having the same social and economic status (Ismail, 2011) [2]. Each socioeconomic class differs in the level of resources and constraints (Henry, 2001)[7]. Life conditions that have potential to influence and holistically interact with one another are taken as resources or constraints (Henry, 2001)[7]. In a typical community, most of the population consists of the upper-lower class and the lower-middle class, making them the focus to most marketers (Henry, 2001)[7].

Three systematically different characteristics between social classes have been found. The first characteristic is the psychological domain such as norms and habits, abstract-level modes of thought and behavioural intentions (Henry, 2001)[7]. The second characteristic is behavioral constraints such as economic resources (Henry, 2001)[7]. The third characteristic is physical influences such as physiological stress, genetic dispositions and environmental conditions (Henry, 2001)[7].

The difference in modes of thought and purchasing power between higher classes and lower classes has an impact on the share of economic resources and the material affluence of an individual (Henry, 2001)[7]. Concentrated within the higher classes are the modes of thought that drives those individuals to learn and integrate new and more advantageous knowledge to the economy; those characteristics include the willingness to tackle challenges, the focus on planning to accomplish future goals, and the reaching of motivation (Henry, 2001) [7]. On the other hand, lower classes show lower tendency to attain future goals (Henry, 2001) [7].

The tendency for higher classes individuals to strive for learning, adapting and integrating new knowledge may contribute to greater susceptibility to interpersonal influence as compared to lower classes (Ismail, 2011) [2].

## III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework composes of two independent variables and one dependent variable.

- Two Independent variables: gender and socioeconomic class.
- One Dependent variable: susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

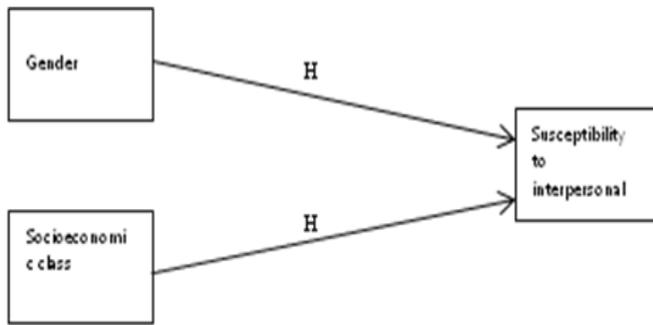


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

**IV. STATEMENT OF PROBLEMS**

The relationship between susceptibility to interpersonal influence and social structure variables such as gender and socioeconomic class remains relatively unexplored (Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel, 1990)[3]. This study aims to deepen the understanding of the consumers’ susceptibility to interpersonal influence and buying behaviour and establish correlations between these social structure variables for the Indian population.

**V. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

- To investigate the gender differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence of the Indian population.
- To investigate the socioeconomic class differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence of the Indian population.

**VI. SCOPE OF RESEARCH**

This research is a basic research that investigates social structural variables as the potential antecedents to interpersonal influence susceptibility of Indian population and their correlations with each other. The two independent variables are gender and socioeconomic class. The dependent variable is susceptibility to interpersonal influence. The data will be collected through social networks and online platforms using a set of online questionnaires distributed to India’s population.

**VII. LIMITATIONS TO THE STUDY**

Different respondents have varying personal traits and characteristics, which are not assessed in this research that may have an influence on their susceptibility to interpersonal influence.

India is a very diverse city in terms of cultures and religion. Different parts of India have different traditions and cultures, which may act as the intermediate variables that affect interpersonal influence susceptibility (Mourali, Laroche, and Pons, 2005). These differences may produce different interactions and relationships between socialization agents and the learners. This research does not take into account the cultural differences in the analysis.

**VIII. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

By exploring the differences in social structural variables (gender and socioeconomic class) and their relationship to susceptibility of interpersonal influence, the feedback of this

research can improve the marketers’ awareness of the factors contributing to the consumer socialization, buying behaviour and purchasing decision-making process of Indians, and can contribute to the development of effective advertising strategies directed at specific target groups of consumers based on their social structural variables.

**IX. RESEARCH HYPOTHESES**

It is necessary to construct a set of hypotheses to test the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable to see the validity of the assumptions, based on the conceptual framework. This study constructs two hypotheses to test the relationship of the variables.

H1: There would be significant gender differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in India’s population. Female consumers would be more susceptible to both types of interpersonal influences, compared to males.

H2: There would be significant differences between low, middle, and high socioeconomic class in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in India’s population. Indian population in high socioeconomic class would be more susceptible to interpersonal influence, compared to other socioeconomic classes.

**X. METHODOLOGY**

In this research, questionnaire was made on Google Docs using the form function. The questionnaire was distributed through well-known online forums and social networks (Facebook and Whatsapp). With each respondent’s consent, their social structural variables (gender, age, monthly income, and education level) were explored through a set of questions in the demographic information section of the questionnaire. For the purpose of this study, each respondent’s socioeconomic class was categorized through their personal monthly income by the classification based on a prior study by Ismail (2011) [2]. The next section of the questionnaire contained 12 scale items for consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence to measure the respondent’s susceptibility to two types of interpersonal influence on their buying behavior. For the purpose of this study, the product category was limited to clothing and personal items. The data were automatically collected by a linked spreadsheet function from the questionnaire onto Google Drive.

**A. Target respondents**

Since the objective of this research is to understand the differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence of Indian population, the target respondent was Indians who has access to the online forums and social networks that the questionnaire was distributed through. There was no age limit. However, the only genders considered in this study were limited to male and female (transsexuals were excluded).



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## B. Sample size

The population of India is above 1369 million. Thus, the sample size must be at least 384 at 95% confidence level. However, the researcher was only able to collect 285 completed responses.

## C. Research instruments

The susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale used in this study was taken from a prior study by Bearden, Netemeyer, and Teel (1989) [1]. This is a two-dimensional measure of consumer susceptibility to interpersonal influence, assessing informational and normative social influences.

The response format for each item is a five-point rating scale ranging from strongly agrees (5) to strongly disagree (1). Measurement items consist of eight items for normative social influence (SI1 to SI8) and four items for informational social influence (SI9 to SI12).

## D. Reliability test

**Table 1: The result of the Cronbach's Alpha test.(n=42)**

No.	Variables	No. of items	Alpha (a-test)
1	Susceptibility to interpersonal Influence	12	0.88
2	Normative	8	0.85
3	Informational Influence	4	0.82

A pretest was conducted to assess the reliability of the translated scale items (at N = 42). The susceptibility to interpersonal influence scale was found to be highly reliable (12 items;  $\alpha = .88$ ). Since the scale was two-dimensional, additional reliability tests were conducted for normative and informational influence sub-items. The normative influence subscale consisted of eight items ( $\alpha = .85$ ), and the informational influence subscale consisted of four items ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

## E. Scoring and statistics

The socioeconomic class was categorized by personal monthly income of the respondents. Low socioeconomic class was defined as those with a monthly income below Rs.10,000; middle socioeconomic class consisted of those who earned between Rs.10,000 to Rs.20,000 per month income; high socioeconomic class was defined as those with a monthly income above Rs.20,000. Each of the susceptibility scale item employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly agree" scored as 5 to "strongly disagree" scored as 1. Sum score of all items was calculated for the interpersonal influence susceptibility scale (SI1 to SI12). Independent-samples t-test at 95% confidence interval was used to assess gender differences, comparing the means between males and females. Differences among three socioeconomic classes were assessed with one-way ANOVA and Scheffe post-hoc test at 95% confidence interval. All statistical tests were applied using SPSS version 17.

Further analysis was done to examine the gender differences in the susceptibility to each type of interpersonal influence. The sum of the items for normative influence (SI1 to SI8) and the sum of items for informative influence (SI9 to SI12) were calculated for the two additional independent-samples t-tests. Additional analyses were conducted to examine the age group and education level, and their differences in the susceptibility to interpersonal influence using one-way ANOVA and Scheffe post-hoc tests.

## XI. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

### A. Descriptive results

The total of responses collected were 288, with three incomplete responses, making the valid responses equal to 285 (N = 285).

### B. Demographic results

**Table 2: Summary of demographic factors (using frequency and percentages)**

Variables	Frequency (f)	Percentage
Gender-		
Male	62	21.8
Female	223	78.2
Age-		
Under the age of 20	16	5.6
20-29	134	47
30-39	34	11.9
40-49	43	15.1
More than 50	58	20.4
Monthly Income (Rs.)-		
10000 or less	60	21.1
10,001 - 20,000	76	26.7
Over 20,000	149	52.2
Educational Level-		
High School or Below	39	13.7
Bachelor Degree	169	59.3
Master Degree and above	77	27
<b>Total</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>100</b>

There were 21.8% males (N = 62) and 78.2% were females (N = 223). Out of the total of 285 valid responses, there were 5.6% under the age of 20 years (N = 16), 47.0% were between the age of 20 to 29 years (N = 134), 11.9% were between the age of 30 to 39 years (N = 34), 15.1% between the age of 40 to 49 years (N = 43) and 20.4% were between the age of 50 to 59 years (N = 58).

For socioeconomic classes, as defined by the personal monthly income for the purpose of this study, there were 21.1% from low socioeconomic class of less than Rs.10,000 as monthly income (N = 60), 26.7% were middle class with monthly income between Rs.10,000 to Rs.20,000 (N = 76) and 52.3% belonged to the high class with an income of more than Rs. 20,000 per month (N = 149).

Additional results of education level are as follows: 13.7% of respondents had lower than Bachelor's degree ( $N = 39$ ), 59.3% have a Bachelor's degree ( $N = 169$ ), and 27.0% have higher than Bachelor's degree level of education ( $N = 77$ ).

### C. Summary of findings

For the overall scale (SI1 to SI12), males ( $M = 35.50$ ,  $SD = 9.67$ ) and females ( $M = 33.26$ ,  $SD = 9.49$ ) did not differ significantly on levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence,  $t(283) = 1.64$ ,  $p > 0.05$ . However, when each dimension of the scale were assessed separately in additional t-tests, the results were significant for the gender differences in normative influence susceptibility.

Men ( $M = 21.29$ ,  $SD = 7.24$ ) reported significantly higher levels of susceptibility to normative interpersonal influence than females ( $M = 19.16$ ,  $SD = 7.18$ ),  $t(283) = 2.06$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . For informational influence, males ( $M = 14.21$ ,  $SD = 3.47$ ) and females ( $M = 14.10$ ,  $SD = 3.71$ ) did not differ significantly on levels of susceptibility to this type of interpersonal influence.

There was no significant difference in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence between low socioeconomic class ( $M = 34.08$ ,  $SD = 8.76$ ), middle socioeconomic class ( $M = 34.29$ ,  $SD = 9.51$ ), and high socioeconomic class ( $M = 33.34$ ,  $SD = 9.92$ ),  $F(2, 282) = .30$ ,  $p > 0.05$ .

Additional ANOVA tests were conducted for education level and age groups. There was no significant difference in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence between those with lower than Bachelor's degrees ( $M = 35.26$ ,  $SD = 9.05$ ), those with Bachelor's degrees ( $M = 33.67$ ,  $SD = 9.62$ ) and those who had higher than Bachelor's degree ( $M = 33.14$ ,  $SD = 9.71$ ),  $F(2, 282) = .64$ ,  $p > 0.05$ .

There were significant differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence between some of the age groups,  $F(4, 280) = 7.23$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The group of those under 20 years ( $M = 38.00$ ,  $SD = 8.64$ ) reported higher levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence than the group in the age between 30 to 39 years ( $M = 28.94$ ,  $SD = 9.78$ ). The group of those between 20 to 29 years ( $M = 36.19$ ,  $SD = 8.36$ ) reported higher levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence than the group of those between 30 to 39 years ( $M = 28.94$ ,  $SD = 9.78$ ) and the group of those who were aged between 40 to 49 years ( $M = 30.88$ ,  $SD = 10.11$ ).

## XII. CONCLUSION

When assessing the scale as a whole, there were no gender differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in the population of India. The findings indicate that both females and males have the same levels of susceptibility to general interpersonal influences when purchasing clothing and personal items. However, when assessing each dimension of the scale separately, males were found to be significantly more vulnerable to normative interpersonal influence than females. The findings reflect that males tend to conform to the positive expectations of other individuals within their society as they may be more driven by the desire to boost self-image through referent identification with other males who are presumably higher in the social hierarchy (aspiration group), as compared to females. The

higher susceptibility to normative social influence suggests that males are more concerned of their self-presentation and are more likely to avoid negative impression in public setting (Wooten & Reed, 2004)[8]. This occurrence may be due to the male-dominant cultures and traditions, where males are expected to strive and gain more achievements and recognitions within the society.

Furthermore, males and females are equal in their levels of susceptibility to informational influences when purchasing clothing and personal items. This indicates that both genders have an equal tendency to accept information about a product from other individuals and make purchasing decision based on information received from others. The high accessibility to information via mobile phones and the Internet may play a role in the apparent information seeking behaviour of both genders of population.

The findings of this study contradict with the study by Ismail (2011) [2]. Ismail (2011) [2] found that Pakistani males and females have no differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence when purchasing home appliances. The differences in the research findings may lie in the product category and culture differences. Other than the possibility of the Pakistani males and females being equally influenced by the environmental factors, the marketing strategies for home appliance products might have been made in a way that both genders are targeted, or home appliances may be the products that require high involvement from all the members of the family while purchasing (Ismail, 2011)[2].

There were no socioeconomic class differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in Indian population. The findings suggest that all low, middle, and high socioeconomic classes are equally susceptible to interpersonal influence when buying clothing and personal items. The results may be due to the ineffective categorization of socioeconomic class, which means a more accurate categorization criteria should be used. Personal monthly income alone may not be the most effective indicator of socioeconomic class.

The findings of this study also contradict with study by Ismail (2011)[2]. Pakistani respondents of the high socioeconomic class were found to be more vulnerable to interpersonal influence than lower socioeconomic classes (Ismail, 2011) [2]. The contradictions in the findings might be due to the categorization of socioeconomic classes that may not be applicable with the Indian population. There were also no education level differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in Indian population. The findings imply that Indians of all education level are equally susceptible to interpersonal influence while buying clothing items. Education level could be combined with personal monthly income to create more accurate categorization criteria for socioeconomic class for the Indians. There were significant age differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence between some of the age groups. A trend is apparent amongst the Indians. The levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence decreases as age increases. This may be due to the high levels of interaction younger people have with their peers, and the high peer pressure and social pressure leading from the needs to identify themselves and to fit in with their society.

## A. Conclusion of the hypothesis testing

The first null hypothesis (H1) got rejected. There are no gender differences in the overall levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence amongst the Indians. However, males were found to be significantly more susceptible to normative interpersonal influence compared to females. Thus, there are gender differences in the susceptibility to interpersonal influence between males and females when assessed each dimension of the scale as a separate dependent variable. The second null hypothesis (H2) was accepted.

There are no socioeconomic class differences in the levels of susceptibility to interpersonal influence in the population of India.

## Implications for practice

The findings of this research expand the limits of knowledge and create the fundamental basis for the understanding of the purchasing decision-making process and buying behaviour of Indians. The awareness of the differences in susceptibility to interpersonal influence between specific social structural variables can help improve the marketing strategies.

By expanding the scope of this research, it can contribute to the development of effective advertising strategies directed at specific target groups of consumers based on their social structural variables.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Future research should expand the scope of the research and investigate all of the social structural variables, including family size and race, in order to create a deeper understanding of Indian's buying behaviour and consumer socialization process. Future research should collect a much larger sample size and distribute the survey uniformly throughout the country.

Cultural differences have been found to be influential on the susceptibility to interpersonal influence (Mourali et al., 2005)[9]. Since the Indian culture possess the dissimilarities in the upbringing and traditions between the males and the females, therefore, cultural and traditional differences between social structural variables (especially gender) should also be investigated to find the intermediate factors affecting susceptibility to interpersonal influence as a behavioural outcome between males and females.

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