

# **Impact of social power on the shopping experience of female adolescents: An international and exploratory study**

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## **Abstract**

The paper investigates the influence of social power bases on female adolescents' purchase decisions, and analyses how peers and parents influence their shopping process in retail stores in France, Australia, Ireland and Hungary. An exploratory research was conducted through focus group discussions with 33 female high school students aged 16-18 years old. The findings show that female adolescents perceive shopping with peers mostly as a recreational, entertaining activity while shopping with parents is seen as a more utilitarian activity. Differences of the social power bases exercised by peers and parents can be explained by cultural differences.

**Keywords:** social power, retail stores, female adolescents

## **Purpose of the Paper**

Parents and peers represent the two most important sources of influence over adolescents' purchase decisions (Childers and Rao, 1992), however the orientation and intensity of their influence differs significantly. They both exert either informational and/or normative social influence over the young females' shopping behaviour through three processes (Kelman, 1961): via compliance, identification and internationalization. French and Raven (1959) provided a list of social power bases - expert power, legitimate power, referent power, reward power and coercive power - for the evaluation of the influences.

The purpose of the paper is to shed light on how peers and parents influence the shopping process of female adolescents in retail stores in the following four countries, France, Australia, Ireland and Hungary as well as to see whether cultural differences have an impact on the type of the influence.

### **Research methodology**

An exploratory research has been conducted via a hybrid research methodology. Focus group discussions (Morgan, 1996) were combined by individual written questionnaires in order to get data about the investigated question and then a content analysis (Krippendorff, 2004) was performed to elicit meaning and formulate conclusions from the data.

The same data collection protocol was applied in the four countries. The sample consisted of 33 female adolescents aged 16-18 years old (7 to 8 female adolescents per focus group and country), who were recruited from high-schools. The focus on female adolescents is explained by the findings of Gentina and Chandon (2014) who point to girls' high susceptibility of peer influence on their shopping decisions.

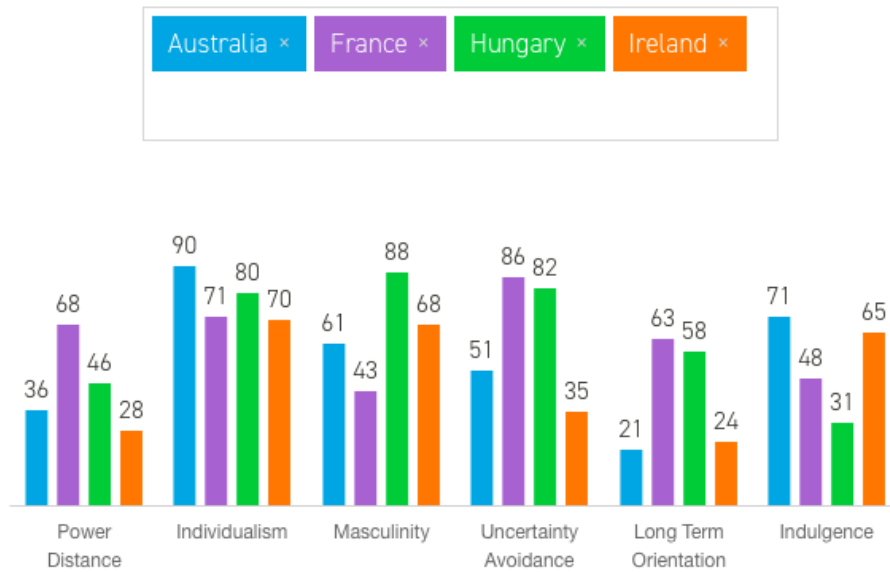
Focus group discussions are common in qualitative research targeting adults, but have been shown useful in research with children as well (e.g. Levine and Zimmerman, 1996; Lewis, 1992). The focus group discussions were video taped, and content analysis was then used to understand how the teenagers' shopping experiences are influenced by peers and parents. The directed content analysis approach as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) was used.

The focus group discussions were conducted using an interview guide containing two parts: discussion of previous shopping experiences, preference of company and their influence on their shopping experience.

Data was analyzed using 2 frameworks: the matrix of Hofstede (2018) was used to account for cultural differences, and the five-social power framework (French and Raven, 1959; Goodrich and Mangleburg 2010) was used to explain the influence exerted by peers, parents and the social network.

As seen in Figure 1 below, all four countries scored highly on the individualism dimension (Hofstede, 2018). However, French and Hungarian girls showed higher levels in the dimensions of power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation and lower levels in indulgence dimension compared to Australian and Irish teenage girls.

Figure 1: Hofstede Cultural Dimensions



Source: Hofstede (2018)

Research by French and Raven (1959) as well as Goodrich and Mangleburg (2010) analysed the influence exercised by peers, parents and social networks in general using the following five-social power framework.

1. Expert power: the teen assumes that the parent or peer is an expert, has expert knowledge, or possesses special information.
2. Legitimate power: teens perceive parents or peers to have a legitimate right to impose behavioural requirements on them.
3. Referent power: the teen personally identifies with the parent or peer.
4. Reward power: teens perceive parents or peers as having the ability to confer rewards on them.
5. Coercive power: teens perceive parents or peers as having the ability to confer punishment upon them.”

The Hofstede matrix and the five social power framework of French and Raven represented the basis of the present research.

### Findings of the research

The initial findings of this research are twofold. First, the results show that female adolescents perceive shopping with peers mostly as a recreational, entertaining activity while shopping with parents is seen as a more utilitarian activity. They mostly acknowledge the financial power of their parents, but also value the time they spend together.

Second, the findings highlighted significant differences in terms of the social power bases exercised by peers and parents during the shopping process of young females based on cultural differences. These differences can be explained when applying Hofstede’s cultural dimensions as well as the five social power framework.

We classified our findings for each country and each relationship (peer and parents) analysing the type of social influence experienced during shopping. We will subsequently summarize common themes and contrast differences in a discussion section.

All our female adolescents generally like going shopping. Girls in Hungary, France and Ireland prefer shopping in store while Australian girls are equally comfortable with shopping online. Girls, in principle, give preference to shopping with peers or with their mother then shopping alone, however, the intensity of this preference varies amongst countries. In Hungary, teenage girls dislike shopping by themselves while French, Australian and Irish girls prefer company when shopping, but are comfortable by themselves as well.

In all of the four countries, female adolescents make a distinction between shopping with their peers and shopping with their mother. Shopping with friends is a truly recreational, entertaining and social activity, while shopping with their mothers is about spending quality time and making important purchase decisions.

In all of the four countries, teenage girls ask for the opinion of their peers when making a purchase. However, their reasons for asking for their friends' opinion differ. Hungarian teenage look for reassurance, which is a socially expected behavior. In this case, their friends exert coercive and referent power on their behavior. Hungarian girls score high on the masculinity, individualism and risk avoidance dimensions, while scoring low on the indulgence dimension, which indicates while they are independent, they feel that they have to adhere to social norms, and avoid confrontation.

French teenage girls want to "be efficient" and tend to only consider legitimate advice of their closest friends. Reference power of social influence doesn't seem to be as important. In France, the girls' behavior can be explained by their high scores on the masculinity and indulgence dimensions.

While some Irish girls are happy to make their own decisions, others will need their friends' reassurance and will base their decision on their opinions. Hence, referent power (identification with peers) and reward power (peers as having the ability to reward and reassure them) seem to be drivers of the Irish girls' behavior.

Australian teens can relate to their friends' taste even though they have developed their own taste and style. They are able to choose day-to-day clothes and make-up that would suit their friends, and often act as experts for these categories. Expert power and referent power are applied in this case. Irish and Australian girls score reasonably high on the independence, masculinity as well as indulgence dimensions, and low on the risk avoidance and power distance, which explains their level of independency and desire to indulge, but to fit in with others at the same time.

There is an agreement that shopping with their mother is seen as a more utilitarian activity as girls' first reasons for why they like shopping with their mothers are their financial power and their help in getting to the stores by car. Their second and third reasons highlight the appreciation for their mothers; e.g. they all enjoy the quality time they can spend with their mothers who are generally very busy.

When looking at the social power of the mother on the choice of teenage girls it becomes clear that in all of the four countries mums have an important financial power. Though, Australian teenage girls also tend to see their mums as experts; they perceive them as more knowledgeable and experienced.

## **Conclusion**

Teenage girls in all four countries like shopping especially for fun and enjoyment. They generally prefer to shop in stores except for Australian girls who seem comfortable to shop online. While Hungarian girls dislike shopping by themselves, and others are comfortable to go shopping by themselves when on a mission, they all prefer to be accompanied by their friends or mum. Girls' reasoning about the importance of their peers' presence during shopping differ significantly across countries, however their explanation on why they like their mother to be with them during the purchase process show clear similarities: all girls like going shopping with their mothers due to their financial resources, and quality time spent together.

Overall, this research study found more similarities between Australian and Irish girls compared to French and Hungarian teenage girls. These similarities can be explained by cultural dimensions, whereby Australian and Irish teenage girls' scores were more similar during the evaluation of the findings.

The findings of the research point to the importance of a different approach retailers should apply in the four countries towards their female adolescent customers. Based on the different social power bases girls' mother and peers exert over the purchase process of young female shoppers, retailers should build a different shopping environment in which girls feel good, comfortable and efficient in the different countries. The teenage girls are all about expressing their individuality through their purchases. So providing both experiential opportunities of self-expression in-store and decisions-making tools with utilitarian information are two options for retailers to convert store visits into purchases, and build long term relationships with this specific target.

## **Relevance of the research**

While previous studies were conducted to identify the mechanism of how social power influences people's behaviour, there are very few papers taking into account intercultural differences, and analysing how they affect the social power bases of female adolescents. There is no evidence of any research that analysed these effects when making purchases in retail stores. The findings of this research are of high importance for retailers, who by knowing the sources of these influences as well as their mechanism, would be more effective in their selling activities.

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