

THE RISE OF ASPIRATIONAL CONSUMPTION IN ASIA: EXPLORING CONSUMER MOTIVATION, MARKET FORCES AND BRAND EQUITY DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Aspirational consumption has emerged as one of the most prominent features of contemporary consumer markets across Asia. Rapid economic development, urbanisation, digital connectivity, and the expansion of the middle class have transformed consumption from a functional activity into a means of expressing identity, social mobility, and personal success. Consumers increasingly seek products and brands that symbolise achievement and prestige while remaining financially attainable. This shift has fuelled the remarkable growth of masstige and affordable premium brands across sectors such as fashion, electronics, automobiles, cosmetics, and lifestyle products. Although aspirational consumption has attracted growing scholarly attention, existing research remains fragmented, with limited integration of the psychological, socio-cultural, and brand-related factors that collectively shape this phenomenon across Asian markets. The proposed study seeks to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework explaining the growth trajectory of aspirational consumption in Asia by integrating insights on consumer psychology and branding from emerging market literature. Particular emphasis was placed on understanding how intrinsic consumer motivations, such as the need for uniqueness, hedonism, and extended self, drive the purchase intention of customers of masstige products. The study further examined the moderating role of brand equity, encompassing perceived quality, brand image, and consumer trust, in translating aspirational motives into purchase intention and long-term brand preference. Rather than functioning merely as an outcome of marketing efforts, brand equity is conceptualised as a strategic mechanism that amplifies consumers' aspirations and strengthens their emotional attachment to brands. Drawing upon theories such as Self-Concept Theory, Social Identity Theory, Signalling Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory, the paper aims to integrate diverse theoretical perspectives into a unified explanation of aspirational consumption in Asia. The proposed framework is expected to contribute to the literature by extending the current understanding beyond luxury consumption to the rapidly expanding masstige segment. The study will also offer actionable insights for marketers and policymakers seeking to develop sustainable, culturally relevant branding strategies that resonate with the aspirations of Asia's increasingly affluent and identity-conscious consumers.

1. Introduction and Background

In contemporary global marketing, few phenomena are as transformative as the structural shift in consumption patterns across Asian markets. Historically characterised by high savings rates and functional, utilitarian purchasing behaviours, Asian consumer landscapes are undergoing profound evolution toward identity-driven, prestige-oriented, and symbolic consumption (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009). This behavioural realignment is fuelled by a convergence of powerful macroeconomic forces, including rapid urbanisation, unprecedented digital connectivity, rising disposable incomes, and the exponential expansion of the middle class (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Within these modernising economies, consumption has transcended its traditional role of meeting physiological and functional necessities. Instead, it has become a primary sociocultural mechanism for negotiating personal identity, signalling upward social mobility, and visually manifesting economic success (Belk, 1988; Tajfel, 1978).

As millions of Asian consumers transition out of low-income brackets into the affluent middle class, a distinct market friction emerges: the "luxury gap." Traditional luxury brands offer the prestige and social signalling that consumers desire, but their exclusionary pricing strategies make them financially out of reach for the emerging mass market. Conversely, conventional mass-market goods are affordable but fail to provide the psychological satisfaction or status symbols necessary to validate an individual's socioeconomic advancement. To resolve this tension, contemporary consumers increasingly turn to "masstige"—mass prestige—and affordable premium brands (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009). These brands successfully bridge the gap by offering premium functional quality, sophisticated brand personas, and high emotional value while remaining financially accessible to the aspirational shopper. This unique market dynamic has driven exponential growth across sectors such as fashion, personal electronics, automobiles, cosmetics, and lifestyle products.

Despite the growing market presence of masstige products, existing marketing literature remains fragmented. Current research heavily focuses either on top-tier luxury consumption or standard mass-market dynamics, leaving the middle "masstige" space undertheorized, particularly within the context of emerging Asian economies. Furthermore,

existing studies often isolate consumer psychology from brand management strategies, failing to explain how internal consumer motivations interact with external brand assets to influence behaviour. A comprehensive, unified theoretical framework is required to model how psychological drivers, socio-cultural pressures, and strategic brand equity mechanisms interact within these rapidly evolving markets.

This study addresses this theoretical gap by establishing a generalised "mother paradigm" that unifies these fragmented streams. The study investigates how core intrinsic consumer motivations—specifically the need for uniqueness (Tian et al., 2001), hedonism (Babin et al., 1994), and the extended self (Belk, 1988)—drive purchase intentions toward masstige products. Crucially, rather than viewing customer-based brand equity (CBBE) as a static marketing outcome, this framework conceptualises brand equity (comprising perceived quality, brand image, and consumer trust) as a dynamic moderating filter that actively amplifies consumer aspirations and strengthens emotional brand attachment (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). By integrating self-concept theory (Belk, 1988), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), signalling theory (Spence, 1973), and consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005), this study builds a cohesive theoretical model. The resulting framework provides a rigorous foundation for future empirical studies across diverse industries and sub-regions, offering actionable strategic insights for both global marketers and regional policymakers navigating Asia's identity-conscious market.

2. Theoretical Grounding and Literature Review

To build a robust, generalised framework for aspirational consumption in Asia, this study synthesises four foundational theoretical paradigms: self-concept theory (Belk, 1988), social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), signalling theory (Spence, 1973), and consumer culture theory (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). While traditional luxury literature often deploys these frameworks in isolation, explaining the unique dynamics of the masstige market requires an integrated approach. Masstige consumption represents a complex socio-psychological paradox: it balances mass accessibility with premium prestige (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009). This section unifies these theoretical perspectives to explain how modern Asian consumers navigate identity, status, and market signals through affordable premium

goods.

2.1. Self-Concept Theory and the Extended Self

At the individual level, aspirational consumption is rooted in the construction, maintenance, and projection of personal identity. Self-Concept Theory posits that individuals possess an actual self (the reality of who they are) and an ideal self (the aspirational representation of who they wish to become) (Sirgy, 1982). Grounded in Belk's (1988) seminal work, the extended self paradigm explains that consumers psychologically view their material possessions as functional extensions of their identity. Material goods are not mere tools; they serve as objective evidence of an individual's capabilities, progress, and personal milestones.

In emerging Asian economies, where rapid economic shifts allow for swift personal advancement, the cognitive gap between a consumer's actual economic status and their ideal social status can be significant. Masstige brands provide an accessible mechanism for bridging this divide. Because high-end luxury remains financially restrictive, consumers strategically acquire affordable premium products to experience and project their ideal self-concept (Truong et al., 2009). The acquisition of a masstige product functions as material validation of personal success and hard work. By incorporating these highly symbolic brands into their extended self, consumers achieve psychological congruity and use accessible premiums to validate their upward socioeconomic trajectory.

2.2. Social Identity Theory

While Self-Concept Theory focuses on internal psychological dynamics, Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) addresses how individuals define themselves through social groups. According to Tajfel (1978) and Turner et al. (1987), an individual's self-esteem and social standing are deeply tied to the perceived status of their "in-groups" relative to "out-groups." To maintain a positive social identity, consumers engage in upward social comparison, actively adopting behaviours and consumption patterns associated with higher-status social strata.

This dynamic is particularly powerful in Asian markets, which are historically rooted in collectivistic social structures (Hofstede, 2011). In these environments, individual identity is deeply embedded in social networks, making group approval and social conformity paramount.

However, modernisation has introduced Western-style individualism and competitive displays into these traditional structures (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). Masstige consumption resolves this tension by serving dual purposes. It functions as a tool for peer-group compliance, allowing consumers to fit in with an increasingly affluent middle-class in-group, while simultaneously serving as a mechanism for status differentiation from lower socioeconomic out-groups. By consuming brands that signal prestige yet remain financially attainable, Asian consumers successfully navigate collective expectations while asserting their upward social mobility.

2.3. Signaling Theory

To understand how masstige brands convey status across these social networks, this framework incorporates signalling theory (Spence, 1973). Originally developed in economics, signalling theory explains how individuals or entities resolve information asymmetry by transmitting observable, credible cues about their unobservable characteristics. In a consumer behaviour context, brands act as market signals that convey a buyer's unobservable traits, such as taste, sophistication, wealth, and social standing (Erdem & Swait, 1998).

In traditional premium markets, luxury brands rely on high price tags and extreme scarcity to ensure clear signals and exclusivity. However, this strategy excludes the vast majority of emerging middle-class consumers from the target group. Masstige brands rewrite this dynamic by optimising their signal efficiency (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003). They offer high stylistic prestige, recognisable design cues, and premium brand associations, ensuring that brand signals remain clear and socially visible. Simultaneously, they keep prices low enough to remain accessible to consumers. For aspirational Asian consumers, high-equity masstige products serve as highly efficient social signals. They deliver the necessary socioeconomic cues to peers and society without requiring the prohibitive financial outlays of top-tier luxury.

2.4. Consumer Culture Theory (CCT)

Finally, CCT provides the macroscopic lens necessary to understand how these psychological, social, and structural signals function within Asia's specific cultural landscapes. CCT views consumption not merely as an economic transaction, but as a dynamic cultural system in which consumers actively reshape global market

meanings to fit local social realities (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

In Asia, consumer culture is shaped by the intersection of global brand semiotics and deeply ingrained cultural values. For example, East Asian societies are highly influenced by the concept of "face" (Mianzi), where maintaining public dignity, reputation, and social prestige is a core cultural imperative (Wong & Ahuvia, 1998). In South and Southeast Asia, similar dynamics manifest as an intense social expectation to display familial and personal progress through material success. Masstige brands fit perfectly into this cultural landscape. They provide culturally safe symbols of modernisation and prestige, allowing consumers to protect and enhance their public "face" while participating in the global consumer economy. CCT helps explain why masstige brands are not just a temporary retail trend in Asia, but a core component of how modernising societies negotiate

the balance between globalised modernity and localised cultural capital.

2.5. Synthesis: The Masstige Paradox

By unifying these four theories, we can see how masstige brands occupy a unique theoretical space, distinct from both mass-market goods and traditional luxury. Silverstein and Fiske (2003) originally defined masstige as premium products that command a price premium over conventional commodities but remain accessible to a broad base of middle-market consumers. Traditional luxury creates value through absolute exclusivity and financial barriers, whereas masstige generates value through selective exclusivity and emotional accessibility (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004; Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Table 1 represents the various theoretical dimensions and positioning of masstige brands between mass-market and traditional luxury brands.

Table 1: Theoretical Dimensions and Masstige Positioning

Theoretical Dimension	Mass-Market Brands	Masstige / Affordable Premium	Traditional Luxury Brands
Self-Concept Integration	Functional utility; aligns primarily with the <i>actual self</i> .	Identity-driven; bridges the gap between the <i>actual</i> and <i>ideal self</i> .	Elite status; represents an exclusive, highly restrictive <i>ideal self</i> .
Social Identity Dynamics	Group conformity within the baseline mass-market demographic.	Upward social comparison; signals membership in the affluent middle class.	Rigid social stratification; signals elite, hyper-exclusive out-groups.
Signaling Strategy	Low status signaling; low information asymmetry.	High signal efficiency; clear prestige cues at accessible price points.	High signal exclusivity; relies on extreme premium pricing and scarcity.
Cultural Manifestation	Everyday utilitarian consumption.	Preservation of social "Face" and prestige within modernizing spaces.	Hyper-conspicuous display of inherited or extreme wealth.

As shown in the matrix above, masstige brands manage a delicate balance. They must offer enough premium quality and brand equity to serve as credible identity extensions (Belk, 1988) and effective social signals (Spence, 1973), while maintaining the pricing and distribution models necessary for middle-class access. When implemented successfully, this balance allows consumers to fulfil their deep-seated needs for uniqueness, social advancement, and hedonic pleasure. This theoretical synergy underpins the comprehensive conceptual model developed in the following section.

3. Construct Development and Hypotheses

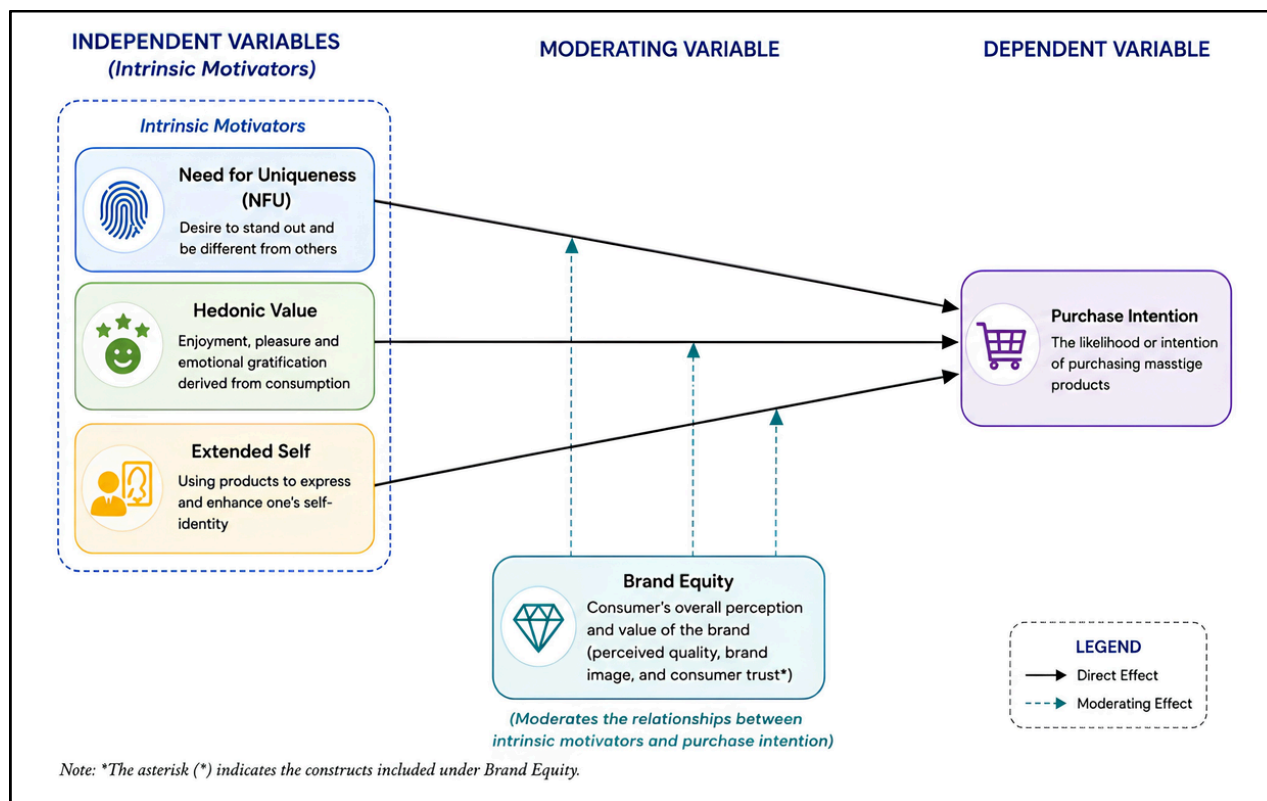
Building on our integrated theoretical framework, this section develops the specific constructs that drive aspirational consumption and formalizes their relationships. The conceptual model is structured around three core independent variables that reflect intrinsic consumer psychology: Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (NFU), Hedonic Value, and the Extended Self. These internal motivations drive the primary behavioural outcome: Purchase Intention.

Crucially, this model posits that the path between psychological motivations and behavioural intent is

not automatic. In emerging Asian markets, this relationship is moderated by customer-based brand equity assets—specifically Perceived Quality, Brand Image, and Consumer Trust. Finally, the model (refer

to figure 1) shows how immediate, transaction-specific Purchase Intention develops into long-term, sustainable Brand Preference.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework depicting the proposed relationships among the variables



Source: Developed by the authors using AI through prompts

3.1. Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (NFU)

Consumers' need for uniqueness is defined as an individual's pursuit of differentiation from others through the deliberate selection and display of consumer goods (Tian et al., 2001). This motivation operates across three main dimensions: creative choice counter-conformity, unpopular choice counter-conformity, and avoidance of similarity. In traditional luxury markets, consumers achieve this differentiation through prohibitive pricing and extreme scarcity, which naturally limits ownership (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004).

In masstige markets, the drive for uniqueness takes on a more nuanced role. Aspirational consumers do not necessarily want to isolate themselves from their social groups; instead, they seek a balance between blending in and standing out (Kastanakis & Balabanis, 2012). Masstige brands provide an ideal mechanism for this balance through selective exclusivity. They offer unique aesthetic designs, premium brand associations, and limited-edition product lines that allow consumers to demonstrate taste and individuality. This allows buyers to achieve a subtle sense of personal distinctiveness and counter-conformity without completely breaking

away from their broader social group or violating collective norms. Therefore, we propose:

- **H1:** Consumers' Need for Uniqueness (NFU) has a significant positive relationship with purchase intention toward masstige brands.

3.2. Hedonic Value

Hedonic value represents the emotional, sensory, and experiential aspects of consumer behaviour (Babin et al., 1994). Unlike utilitarian consumption, which focuses on functional efficiency and task completion, hedonic consumption is driven by a desire for emotional payoff, pleasure, escapism, and sensory gratification.

Moving away from low-income baseline consumption creates strong emotional rewards for the emerging middle class in Asia. Upgrading from standard mass-market commodities to affordable premium options turns shopping into an act of self-gifting and personal celebration. The elevated design aesthetics, superior retail environments, and premium packaging of masstige products provide immediate emotional utility. This positive emotional

response strengthens the consumer's desire to buy, transforming the transaction from a routine purchase into a source of personal satisfaction and luxury experience. Based on this, we propose:

- **H2:** *Hedonic motivation has a significant positive relationship with purchase intention toward masstige brands.*

3.3. Extended Self

The extended self paradigm states that consumers psychologically integrate their material possessions into their personal identity structures (Belk, 1988). Possessions are not merely functional tools; they serve as objective, external validation of an individual's capabilities, progress, and life stages.

In rapidly changing Asian economies, individuals frequently experience swift changes in their social and financial status. In this environment, the products a person owns serve as visible evidence of hard work and socioeconomic progress. Masstige brands are highly valuable in this process because they offer prestigious, recognisable status signals at accessible prices. By purchasing and displaying an affordable premium product, the consumer incorporates the brand's prestigious image into their own identity. This material ownership validates their upward mobility and bridges the gap between their actual self and ideal self-concept. Thus, we propose:

- **H3:** *The Extended Self has a significant positive relationship with purchase intention toward masstige brands.*

3.4. The Moderating Role of Brand Equity

Customer-based brand equity (CBBE) represents the value a brand adds to a product based on consumer perceptions, awareness, and associations (Yoo & Donthu, 2001). Rather than treating brand equity merely as a static outcome of marketing, this framework positions it as an active cognitive filter. It functions as a strategic mechanism that actively shapes how consumers process their internal motivations. High brand equity validates the consumer's aspirations and strengthens the connection between internal psychological needs and final behavioural intent. This moderation operates across three core dimensions of brand equity:

1. Perceived Quality: This dimension reflects the consumer's subjective judgment of a product's overall excellence or superiority relative to its intended alternative (Zeithaml, 1988). In masstige

consumption, high perceived quality reduces the perceived financial and functional risks of buying an entry-level premium item. It reassures the buyer that the product provides genuine functional value alongside its status symbols, justifying the price premium over mass-market goods.

2. Brand Image: This encompasses the symbolic meanings and mental associations consumers hold toward a brand (Keller, 1993). A strong, consistent brand image provides clear, recognizable social signals. This clarity ensures that when a consumer uses the brand to express uniqueness or project an ideal identity, their social network easily decodes and validates that signal.

3. Consumer Trust: This represents the consumer's confidence in the brand's reliability, integrity, and long-term consistency (Chaudhuri & Holbrook, 2001). Trust provides emotional security. It assures the aspirational consumer that the brand will continue to maintain its social status and quality standards, protecting their emotional and financial investment.

When a masstige brand possesses strong assets across these dimensions, it validates the consumer's underlying motivations. It assures the consumer that their choice is socially credible, functionally sound, and emotionally safe. Consequently, higher brand equity amplifies the impact of intrinsic psychological needs (NFU, Hedonism, Extended Self) on final purchase intentions. Conversely, if a brand lacks sufficient equity, consumers may view the purchase as risky or socially ineffective, which weakens the connection between their motivations and their actual intent to buy. Therefore, we hypothesize:

- **H4:** *Brand equity dimensions (perceived quality, brand image, and consumer trust) positively moderate the relationship between intrinsic consumer motivations (NFU, Hedonism, Extended Self) and purchase intention.*

4. Discussion, Future Research Agenda and Implications

This section synthesizes the theoretical, managerial, and socio-economic contributions of the proposed framework for aspirational consumption in Asia. By integrating consumer psychology with customer-based brand equity assets, this paper offers a unified model that explains how internal motivations translate into sustained brand preference within the rapidly

growing masstige market.

A study of 423 Indian masstige consumers were conducted based on the above conceptual framework and findings are summarized in table 2.

Table 2: Results of the hypotheses testing

Independent variable	Hypotheses	
	Impact of Independent variable on Dependent variable	Moderation Effect
Need For Uniqueness (Durable)	Supported	Supported
Need For Uniqueness (FMCG)	Supported	Supported
Hedonism (Durable)	Supported	Supported
Hedonism (FMCG)	Supported	Supported
Extended Self (Durable)	Supported	Supported
Extended Self (FMCG)	Supported	Supported

The findings clearly show that the purchase intention of aspirational brands is motivated by Need for Uniqueness, Hedonic Value and Extended self and that Brand equity moderates the said relationships.

5.Critical Evaluation and Rationale for a Cross-Cultural Study

The proposed extension of masstige research from the Indian market to other Asian markets is theoretically and empirically justified by the increasing importance of Asia as a major consumption region. India shares several characteristics with other emerging Asian economies, including a rapidly expanding middle class, increasing disposable income, urbanisation, digitalisation, and growing aspirations for status, self-expression, and improved lifestyles. These conditions provide a broadly comparable environment for the development of masstige

consumption. A large-scale study covering ten Asian markets identified consumer profiles characterised by individuality, self-expression, novelty seeking, and the desire to impress others, alongside more collectivistic and ethnocentric consumption orientations (Cui et al., 2022). These characteristics correspond closely with the psychological mechanisms examined in the present Indian study, particularly the need for uniqueness, hedonic value, and extended self.

This similarity is also evident in the role of symbolic consumption. Asian consumers increasingly use brands to communicate their identity, social position, and aspirational lifestyles. However, this does not imply that Asian consumers constitute a homogeneous group. Shukla, Singh, and Banerjee (2015) found significant cross-national differences in symbolic, experiential, and functional perceptions of luxury brands in China, India, and Indonesia. Their findings provide an important theoretical warning against treating “Asian consumers” as a single cultural category. Thus, the Indian findings of the present study may provide a useful conceptual starting point, but their transferability needs to be empirically verified.

5.1. Similarities between India and Other Asian Markets

Several characteristics make India particularly relevant for comparisons with other emerging Asian markets.

First, aspirational middle-class consumption provides a common foundation. Masstige brands allow consumers who may not have access to traditional luxury products to acquire products associated with prestige, quality, and symbolic value. This phenomenon is particularly relevant in rapidly developing Asian economies, where rising incomes coexist with strong aspirations for upward mobility. The 2025 conceptual work of Roy, Das, Lim, and Kalai explicitly positions masstige consumption at the intersection of aspiration and accessibility, while emphasising both social status and intrinsic self-fulfilment motives.

Second, symbolic and identity-related consumption appears relevant across Asian markets. The need for uniqueness and extended self can operate beyond purely functional product evaluation because brands can become resources through which consumers construct and communicate identity. This is particularly relevant to masstige because the category combines accessibility with symbolic

prestige.

Third, social influence and status considerations are important in several Asian societies. However, their intensity and expression differ between countries. Therefore, the literature supports the possibility of common underlying mechanisms while simultaneously suggesting differences in their relative strengths.

Fourth, digitalisation has created increasingly interconnected consumer markets in Asia. Exposure to global brands, influencers, social media communities, and international lifestyles has reduced some traditional geographical boundaries in consumption patterns. This may encourage convergence in the aspirational consumption patterns of younger urban consumers.

5.2. Why the Indian Findings Cannot Simply Be Generalized

Despite these similarities, substantial differences warrant dedicated cross-cultural investigations. The most important concern is the cultural heterogeneity. India is culturally diverse, and its consumers cannot necessarily be assumed to represent consumers in China, Indonesia, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia, or other Asian markets.

Shukla et al. (2015) provide strong evidence for this argument. Their comparison of China, India, and Indonesia demonstrated variations in consumers' perceptions of the symbolic, experiential, and functional value of luxury brands. The authors explicitly caution against treating Asian consumers as homogeneous groups.

Differences are also evident in the specific mechanisms underlying masstige consumption. Shahid et al. (2024), Using Indian and Canadian consumers, Shahid et al. (2024) found that intrinsic and extrinsic motivations influence masstige consumption, but the role of cultural context was not uniform across the two samples. Their findings demonstrate that the relationships between psychological motivations and masstige consumption can be culturally contingent. This provides a strong rationale for extending the present research to multiple Asian cultures rather than assuming that the Indian model is universally applicable.

More specifically, collectivism does not operate in an identical manner across Asian societies. Asian

cultures may share collectivistic tendencies, but the distinction between horizontal and vertical collectivism can produce substantially different consumption motivations for art. Therefore, status-oriented consumption may be more strongly associated with social hierarchy in some markets, whereas self-expression, uniqueness, or experiential value may become more important in others.

The distinction is particularly relevant to the need for uniqueness. In a strongly interdependent cultural environment, consumers may simultaneously desire differentiation and conformity. A masstige brand can therefore serve two apparently contradictory functions: allowing consumers to belong to an aspirational social group while also communicating individuality. The balance between these functions may differ considerably between India, China, Indonesia, Japan, and South Korea.

5.3. Evidence Specifically from Masstige Research

The case for cross-cultural research becomes even stronger because the masstige literature itself is still developing. Pizzetti et al. (2023) compared Chinese and French consumers and found that nationality and self-construal influenced consumers' responses to different masstige strategies. Chinese consumers showed greater acceptance of masstige sub-brands and stronger recognition of the prestige associated with the parent brand, whereas French consumers responded differently to alternative masstige strategies. Although this study does not compare Asian countries, it demonstrates that the effectiveness of masstige strategy is culturally contingent.

Similarly, Soni (2023) found that among Indian respondents, global and local identities have differential effects on preferences for traditional luxury and masstige brands. This suggests that the Indian market itself contains competing identity orientations, making it inappropriate to assume that a single cultural mechanism explains masstige consumption across Asia.

The emerging literature also provides a strong justification for examining brand-related variables cross-culturally. Brand equity may not have the same influence across markets because consumers can attach different meanings to quality, prestige, authenticity, country of origin, and brand image. Consequently, the moderating effect of Brand Equity identified in the Indian study should be tested for measurement equivalence and structural

equivalence before it is extended to other Asian populations.

6. Proposed Direction for Future Research

A future cross-cultural study could therefore extend the present Indian framework by examining consumers in selected Asian markets such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, and Japan. Rather than merely replicating the Indian model, the research should examine whether:

- Need for Uniqueness, Hedonic Value, and Extended Self have equivalent effects on masstige purchase intention across countries.
- Brand Equity exerts a comparable moderating effect across Asian markets.
- The relative importance of symbolic, functional, and experiential value differs across cultures.
- Cultural variables such as individualism/collectivism, power distance, self-construal, and status orientation explain cross-national differences.
- Measurement invariance can be established before comparing structural relationships.
- Product category, age, income, and urbanization moderate the observed cultural differences.

This approach would transform the present Indian study from a country-specific investigation into a broader Asian theoretical framework. Importantly, it would not assume cultural convergence. Instead, it would investigate the extent to which the psychological antecedents and Brand Equity mechanism are culture-general versus culture-specific.

7. Theoretical Contributions

The primary theoretical merit of this framework lies in its ability to reconcile and expand classical consumer behaviour paradigms within the unique context of emerging Asian economies. While existing marketing literature heavily concentrates either on top-tier, exclusive luxury (Vigneron & Johnson, 2004) or standard, commodity-driven mass markets, this study formalises a generalised paradigm for the middle "masstige" space (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009).

First, this study extends Self-Concept and Extended

Self theories (Belk, 1988) by demonstrating that material possessions do not require prohibitive financial barriers to serve as credible identity extensions. In rapidly modernising societies, accessible premium goods are sufficient to bridge the cognitive gap between a consumer's actual self and ideal self-concept. Second, by applying Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) to collectivist yet modernising regions, the framework clarifies how consumption can simultaneously fulfil dual, conflicting social goals: peer-group conformity and status-driven upward comparison.

Finally, a major conceptual shift in this study is the re-characterisation of customer-based brand equity (CBBE). Rather than treating brand equity as a passive outcome of successful marketing operations (Yoo & Donthu, 2001), this framework positions it as an active cognitive filter. High brand equity acts as a strategic amplifier that actively shapes, clarifies, and validates consumers underlying psychological needs. This changes how we view brand equity, moving it from a standard corporate asset to a critical psychological catalyst in behavioural modelling.

8. Strategic Implications for Marketers

For global and regional brand managers operating within Asia, this generalized architecture offers an actionable roadmap to engage identity-conscious consumers without causing brand dilution.

- **Managing Selective Exclusivity:** Marketers must balance wide market availability with perceived prestige. To achieve this, companies can implement strict tiering strategies, regular aesthetic redesigns, or curated digital micro-drops. These tactics cultivate a sense of scarcity and fulfil the consumer's Need for Uniqueness (H_1) while maintaining high production volumes.
- **Localized Symbolic Storytelling:** Because brand image acts as a vital status signal within Asian social networks (H_4), marketing communications should move away from pure utilitarian product descriptions. Instead, campaigns should focus on themes of personal milestone validation, self-gifting (H_2), and social progress. Aligning brand narratives with deep cultural values, such as maintaining public "Face" (Mianzi), ensures that the brand's social signal is easily decoded and respected by the consumer's peers.
- **Mitigating Risk Through Quality Assurance:** Because entry-level premium products require a

meaningful financial commitment from middle-class buyers, brands must deliver high perceived quality. Continuous investment in functional performance, craftsmanship, and consumer trust protects the customer's emotional and financial investment. This assurance converts immediate, transaction-specific purchase intentions into stable, long-term brand preference (H₅).

9. Socio-Economic and Policy Implications

Beyond its corporate utility, the rise of widespread aspirational consumption has broader societal effects that policymakers, economists, and public welfare advocates must monitor.

- **Consumer Debt and Credit Expansion:** The strong psychological drive to display socioeconomic progress through material goods can lead to financial vulnerability. As masstige brands lower the barrier to prestige consumption, there is an increased risk of over-leveraging among young, urban populations through consumer credit, micro-loans, and "Buy Now, Pay Later" (BNPL) schemes. Policymakers should consider implementing targeted financial literacy campaigns and stricter consumer credit regulations to prevent household debt expansion.
- **Sustainability and Hyper-Consumption Challenges:** The rapid adoption of identity-driven consumption accelerates product replacement cycles, particularly in electronics and fashion. This shift presents major environmental challenges, including increased electronic waste and resource depletion. Governments and regional regulatory bodies must encourage circular economy models, incentivize green manufacturing practices, and support sustainable consumer behaviours to balance macroeconomic growth with environmental protection.

10. Conclusion

The Indian market provides a particularly valuable starting point for studying masstige consumption because it combines rapid economic development, an expanding aspirational middle class, cultural diversity, and strong symbolic dimensions. However, India should not be considered a proxy for Asia. The strongest empirical evidence currently available suggests that Asian consumers share important consumption patterns but differ in the meanings they attach to prestige, identity, social

status, functionality, and experience.

Accordingly, the most defensible contribution of a future study would be to determine whether the relationships established in the Indian model are structurally stable across Asian markets or culturally contingent on them. Such research could make an important contribution to masstige theory by distinguishing universal consumer motivations from market-specific ones. It would also provide international marketers with a more nuanced basis for deciding when a standardised Asian masstige strategy is appropriate and when country-level adaptation is necessary for its success.

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