Ved International Journal of Arts, Commerce and Technology (VIJACT)
© VIJACT |Vol.2, Issue 10, Oct 2026, pp. 18-30 | ISSN: 3139-1656 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65785/vijact.v2i10.132
Available online at: https://vijact.com/

We Consume, Because We Belong: The Role of Masstige Brands in Sustaining Relative Social Status and Social Standing

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Article info

Article history:

Received Oct 10, 2026

Accepted Oct 22, 2026

Published Oct 30, 2026

Keywords:

Masstige Consumption

Subjective Social Status

Relative Ranking

Perceived Social Standing

ABSTRACT

Consumption is widely used to signal social position, yet evidence is mixed on whether affordable luxury purchases are driven primarily by self- enhancement among those who feel lower social rank or self-maintenance among those who feel higher. This study investigates that with what degree and direction; subjective social status predicts masstige brand consumption among Indian middle-class consumers. Additionally, if subjective social status and masstige consumption vary across different age groups. The present study on the data collected through the quantitative survey (n = 161), applied simple linear regression, one-way ANOVA and Kruskal–Wallis, to explore relation between subjective social status and masstige brand consumption across different age groups of Indian masstige consumers. The findings reveal that subjective social status positively influence the consumption of masstige brands, indicating that middle class Indian consumers tend to lower the consumptions of such brands when they perceive themselves as low on social ranking. These findings indicate that people are high likely to consume such brands for self-maintenance motive than self-enhancement. Moreover, people's perception of their social status and their consumption of premium brands don't significantly vary across different age groups. The findings offer a meaningful contribution in the theory and practice by explaining the dynamics of a psycho-socio predictor of masstige brands consumption, i.e., subjective social status.

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1.Introduction

Consumption is a way of expressing identity and social position. Research indicates that brands and products are visible indicators of social position (Veblen, 1899; Han et al., 2010). This signalling is not based on objective standing but on the perception of oneself in relation to others (Kraus et al., 2013). Subjective social status (SSS) is the

individual's self-assessment of their position in the social hierarchy (Adler et al., 2000), which may differ from income, education, or occupation (Tan et al., 2020). It is driven by and resulting into emotions, motivations and behaviour (Kraus et al., 2012). Since status goods are used to communicate status, perceived rank should affect what people purchase (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). But the direction of that influence is disputed. Some studies indicate that consumers purchase rank goods to improve their rank (Mandel et al., 2006; Sivanathan & Pettit, 2010). Other studies indicate that consumers who perceive themselves as being high in rank purchase them to sustain their rank (Sirgy, 1982; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). There is uncertainty as to when (low vs high) subjective social status escalate masstige consumption. Thus, we propose to investigate these dynamics amongst Indian middle-class consumers.

The symbolic values of the masstige brands offer prestige to a wider middle-class group (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009; Paul, 2015). They range from fashion and cosmetics to automobiles and electronics, and have emerged as a significant growth segment for global marketers (Kumar et al., 2020; Paul, 2018). Masstige brands are ideal for both motives, as they enable consumers to pursue or defend a status position without the financial commitment of true luxury. They can be used by middle-class consumers with perceived lower social status thereby bridging the gap to a desired social rank. In contrast, it can also be consumed with a status maintenance motive by those who already perceive themselves at a certain social rank. This duality is particularly relevant in India, where a large and growing middle class is aspirational and attuned to peers, family and community (Shukla & Purani, 2012). Thus, we explore the question of whether subjective social status promotes or maintains masstige brands consumption among middle-class consumers in India.

Although masstige brands are commercially significant, the psychological mechanisms underlying their consumption are not well understood. First, the literature on masstige has been more concerned with brand-side antecedents (such as brand image, perceived quality, and pricing strategy) than with consumer-side drivers (Kumar et al., 2020; Paul, 2015). Second, research that does account for status usually considers objective measures like income or education, and fails to capture consumers' subjective sense of their status (Tan et al., 2020). Third, the research on status consumption has been more extensively documented from self-enhancement motives than the research on self-maintenance (Mandel et al., 2006; Rucker & Galinsky, 2008). Evidence for the maintenance motive is thinner and often indirect particularly for masstige brands (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015), As a result, little is known about how subjective social status relates to masstige brands consumption. Therefore, this study proposes to fill this knowledge gap.

We seek to fill these gaps by answering following research gaps:

(i) Does Indian middle-class consumer’s subjective social status influence their consumption of masstige brands?

(ii) Does the level of subjective social status and masstige brand consumption vary across different age groups?

We applied simple linear regression, One Way ANOVA and Kruskal Wallis H-test to analyse quantitative survey data. The present study made a meaningful theoretical contribution in the existing masstige literature by explaining the masstige consumers behaviour from psychological perspective. We extend the research on status and consumption by demonstrating that not only objective but subjective status influences consumption in the accessible-prestige segment. Pragmatically, the findings offer several practical implications for the masstige brand managers. Therefore, presenting novel insights from both theoretical and practical stand point.

2. Conceptual Framework and Hypotheses Development:

2.1 Subjective Social Status and Masstige brand consumption

People don't purchase brands just for the sake of brands they own, but for rank where they think, they stand. This belief is reflected in subjective social status (SSS), which is a person's self-assessment of his or her position in society compared to others (Adler et al., 2000). Middle classes are relatively more inclined towards the practices of social comparison (Tan et al., 2020). This makes it even pivotal in context of masstige brands. Brands which offer prestige for the masses (middle class). They offer middle class people, a prestigious image at affordable price (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009; Paul, 2015). They are considerably seen and relatively accessible brands that are useful for controlling social ranking through social comparison. These consumers are aspirational and conscious of peers, family and community (Shukla & Purani, 2012). Therefore, perceived rank is high likely to be a meaningful predictor for their consumption behaviour. Thus, we argue to investigate dynamics of masstige consumers subjective social status and their brand consumption.

Previous studies offer conflicting views to these dynamics such that, people consume these brands for the enhancement of their social rank (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and for maintaining the existing social status (Sirgy, 1982). The individuals with former motives consume these brands when they feel powerless (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008) and when their status threat is high (Mandel et al., 2006). Where, later one's consume it to communicate their status to others (Eastman et al., 1999; Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Sivanathan and Pettit (2010) state that status goods repair a damaged self-image. However, luxury signals also have social benefits for those who are already perceived as high in status (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). Relative deprivation increases materialism (Kim et al., 2017) and consumers who feel they are falling behind spend more on these socially visible goods (Ordabayeva & Chandon, 2011). However, higher status consumers employ the same products to validate and secure their status (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015).

Masstige brands may attract two types of middle-class status consumers. First, People who feel they are not in the top tier and can't always afford luxury, so masstige brands become an accessible alternative for them. Second, people with an high self-perceived social ranking using these to express that distinction with lower class. One may consume to satisfy the motive of self-enhancement, while other for self-maintenance. The two accounts are contradictory, but the literature has largely grown one. Enhancement is well documented. While, its maintenance motives are relatively less discussed. In India, the status aspiration makes the argument for self enhancement motive plausible, whereas a rising, status conscious consumers make the maintenance motives equally reasonable. How does peoples perceive social ranks direct the consumption of masstige brands needs further empirical examination to generalize this finding. Thus, we hypothesize

H_1: The subjective social status influences the consumption of masstige brands among middle-class consumers in India.

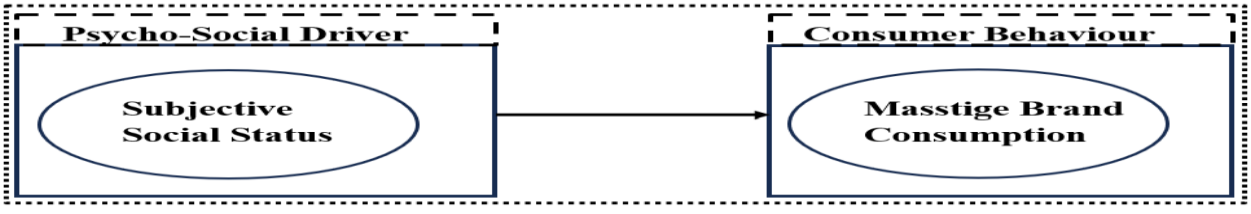


Fig.1 Conceptual Framework

3. Methodology

The present study deployed SPSS version 27 to examine the proposed relationship.

3.1 Measures

The present study adapts the standardised measurement scales from the existing studies to measure the latent construct. The constructs are measured on a mix of both 5-point and 7– point Likert scales. Subjective social status is measured on 5-point scales, contrary to masstige consumption on 7 points. This practice is consistent with a previous study (Nobre et al., 2023) on masstige consumption behaviour. Where 1= *strongly disagree* and 5= *strongly agree*. While, 3 and 5 representing *somewhat disagree* and *somewhat agree*, respectively. The items were contextualised to suit the purpose of the research. Subjective social status was measured by adapting scale from Yu and Blader (2020). While masstige consumption was measured by adapting scale developed by Paul (2015, 2019).

3.2 Study procedures

The study adopted a quantitative survey approach of the cross-sectional descriptive research design. The data was gathered using a structured Google questionnaire from the masstige brand consumers in the Delhi NCR, India. Delhi NCR was chosen because of its easy access to premium brand outlets and the wide range of consumers, providing access to the respondents from a variety of demographic and cultural backgrounds. After data collection, approximately a total of 242 responses were received. Following the process of data screening and cleaning involving removal of outliers and unengaged respondents, 161 valid responses were retained for final analysis.

4 Data Analysis

We employed simple linear regression, Shapiro-Wilk test, Kruskal-Wallis H and One-Way ANOVA using SPSS version 27 to analyse the quantitative data. First, simple linear regression was applied to evaluate the relationship between subjective social status and masstige consumption. Second, to examine the differential effects of subjective social status and masstige consumption across different age groups, two necessary conditions were needed to be satisfied. (i) normality of data (ii) homogeneity of variance. First condition was checked by applying Shapiro-Wilk test and Q - Q plot diagrams. Whereas, for second condition Levene Statistic was calculated. To evaluate the differential effects of age across four groups, One-Way ANOVA was used only in the case where all the necessary conditions were satisfied, otherwise a non-parametric alternative of One-Way ANOVA, i.e., Kruskal-Wallis H was utilized. The demographic analysis revealed (table 1.) that the sample comprised 161 respondents, of whom 88 (54.7%) were female and 73 (45.3%) were male. By age group, 50 respondents (31.1%) were aged 18-30 years, 37 (23.0%) were aged 31- 45 years, 39 (24.2%) were aged 46-60 years, and 35 (21.7%) were above 60 years.

Table 1. Sample characteristics (n = 161)

Particulars	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Female	88 (54.7%)
Male	73 (45.3%)

Total	161 (100%)
Age Groups	
18-30	50 (31.1%)
31-45	37 (23.0%)
46-60	39 (24.2%)
Above 60	35 (21.7%)
Total	161 (100%)

4.1 | Findings

4.1.1 Relationship between Subjective Social Status and Masstige Brand Consumption

To examine the relationship subjective social status (SSS) and masstige brand consumption, simple linear regression was used. The results revealed that the overall model was statistically significant (table 3), $F(1, 159) = 15.118$, $p < .001$, and explained about 8.7% (table 2) of the variance in masstige consumption ($R^2 = .087$, adjusted $R^2 = .081$). The correlation between the two variables was positive and weak to moderate ($R = .295$). As shown in table 3, SSS was a significant positive predictor of masstige brand consumption ($B = 0.44$, $SE = 0.11$, $\beta = .295$, $t(159) = 3.888$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.22, 0.66]). The results Indicated (table 4) that for every one-unit increase in SSS, there was a 0.44-unit increase in masstige consumption. The effect size was small to medium (Cohen's $f^2 = .095$; Cohen, 1988). This finding suggests that the relationship between the subjective social status and the consumption of masstige brands is supported, stating that individuals who perceive a low ranking in their social groups has relatively low tendency to consume mass-luxury brands and vice-versa.

Table 2. *Simple Linear Regression Predicting Masstige Brand Consumption from Subjective Social Status*

Model Summary									
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics				
					R Square Change	F Change	df1	df2	Sig. F Change
1	.295[a]	.087	.081	1.05011	.087	15.118	1	159	.000
a. Predictors: (Constant), Subjective Social Status									

Table 3. ANOVA table

ANOVA[a]						
Model		Sum of Squares	d f	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	16.671	1	16.671	15.118	.000[b]
	Residual	175.334	159	1.103		
	Total	192.006	160			
a. Dependent Variable: Masstige Consumption						
b. Predictors: (Constant), Subjective Social Status						

Table 4. Coefficient table

Coefficients [a]						
Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	3.124	.395		7.909	.000
	Subjective Social Status	.439	.113	.295	3.888	.000
a. Dependent Variable: Masstige Consumption						

4.1.2 Age-wise comparative analysis of Subjective Social Status

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to determine if there was a difference in subjective social status (SSS) among the four age groups: 18-30 years (n = 50), 31- 45 years (n = 37), 46-60 years (n = 39), and over 60 years (n = 35) (table 5). The underlying assumptions were tested prior to the analysis. To establish normality of the data, we utilized Shapiro-Wilk test and a visual graph, i.e., Q-Q plot. The Shapiro-Wilk statistic was not significant (p = .82), suggesting that SSS scores were not significantly different from a normal distribution (table 6), and the Q-Q plot (fig. 2) confirmed this, with observations closely following the reference line. Subsequently, to test the assumption of homogeneity of variance, Levene's test was used and found to be not statistically significant (p = .878), suggesting that variances were equal across age groups (table 7). Therefore, on account of the satisfaction of both the assumptions one-way ANOVA was used. The results showed no statistically significant difference in SSS across age groups (table 8), F (3, 157) = 1.378, p = .251, η^2 = .03, otherwise indicating a small effect. The results revealed that the mean score of SSS were almost similar across all the age groups: 18-30 years (M = 3.27, SD = 0.75), 31-45 years (M = 3.48, SD = 0.75), 46-60 years (M = 3.57, SD = 0.74), and above 60 years (M = 3.39, SD = 0.68). The overall mean was 3.42 (SD = 0.73). The difference between the 46-60 group and the 18-30 group was not statistically significant, although the 46 - 60 group reported the highest SSS and the 18-30 group the lowest. Overall, In the present sample, the results showed no statistical difference in respondents' perceptions of their social standing based on their age groups.

Table 5. Age wise descriptive Statistics of subjective social status by using One -Way ANOVA.

Age group	*n*	*M*	*SD*	95% CI
18-30	50	3.27	0.75	[3.06, 3.48]
31-45	37	3.48	0.75	[3.23, 3.73]
46-60	39	3.57	0.74	[3.33, 3.81]
Above 60	35	3.39	0.68	[3.15, 3.62]
Total	161	3.42	0.73	[3.30, 3.53]

Note. F (3, 157) = 1.378, p = .251, η^2 = .03.

Table 6. Tests of Normality using Kolmogorov-Smirnov Shapiro -Wilk

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
Subjective Social Status	Statistic	d f	Sig.	Statistic	d f	Sig.
	.074	161	.029	.985	161	.082

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

Fig 2. Tests of Normality using Q - Q plot



Note: SSS New represents Subjective Social Status

Table 7. Tests of Homogeneity of Variances

		Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Subjective Social Status	Based on Mean	.227	3	157	.878
	Based on Median	.294	3	157	.830
	Based on Median and with adjusted df	.294	3	153.708	.830
	Based on trimmed mean	.232	3	157	.874

Table 8. ANOVA

Subjective Social Status					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.216	3	.739	1.378	.251
Within Groups	84.124	157	.536		
Total	86.340	160			

4.1.3 Age-wise comparative analysis of Masstige Brand Consumption

Similarly, to conduct an age wise comparison of the variable, i.e., masstige consumption, the same sequence was followed, i.e., checking the normality of data and calculation of Levene statistics. To test the normality of the data Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk test along with visual inspection of the Q-Q plot were assess. Both tests revealed a statistically significant results, D (161) = .085, p = .006, and W (161) = .969, p = .001, suggesting that the scores on the construct masstige consumption were not normally distributed (table 10). The deviations from the reference line, especially in the lower tail of the distribution as depicted in the Q-Q plot confirmed this finding. As the assumption of the normal distribution of the data was violated, the non-parametric alternative, of the one-way ANOVA namely Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied. The p-value higher than 0.05 of the Kruskal- Wallis test revealed (table. 11) that there was no significant difference in masstige brand consumption tendencies of the middle-class Indian consumers across different age group, H (3) = 1.227, p = .746, ε^2 = .008, otherwise indicating a negligible effect size. As shown in table 9, mean scores were broadly similar across groups: 18-30 years (M = 4.59, SD = 1.02), 31-45 years (M = 4.82, SD = 1.06), 46-60 years (M = 4.64, SD = 1.11), and above 60 years (M = 4.46, SD = 1.23). The overall mean was 4.63 (SD = 1.10). The differences in consumption across different age groups were small and insignificant, with the age group 31- 45 reporting as the highest mean score on the masstige consumption while the age group above 60, scoring as the least among all. Thus, the masstige brand consumption is relatively stable across all the age groups in this sample.

Table 9. Age wise descriptive Statistics of masstige consumption by using Kruskal-Wallis Test.

Age Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
18-30	50	4.5860	1.01519	.14357	4.2975	4.8745	2.00	6.50
31-45	37	4.8216	1.06436	.17498	4.4667	5.1765	2.00	6.70
46-60	39	4.6385	1.10944	.17765	4.2788	4.9981	1.70	7.00
Above 60	35	4.4600	1.23054	.20800	4.0373	4.8827	1.10	6.00
Total	161	4.6255	1.09546	.08633	4.4550	4.7960	1.10	7.00

Table 10. Tests of Normality

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov[a]			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Masstige New	.085	161	.006	.969	161	.001
a. Lilliefors Significance Correction						

Fig 3. Tests of Normality using Q - Q plot

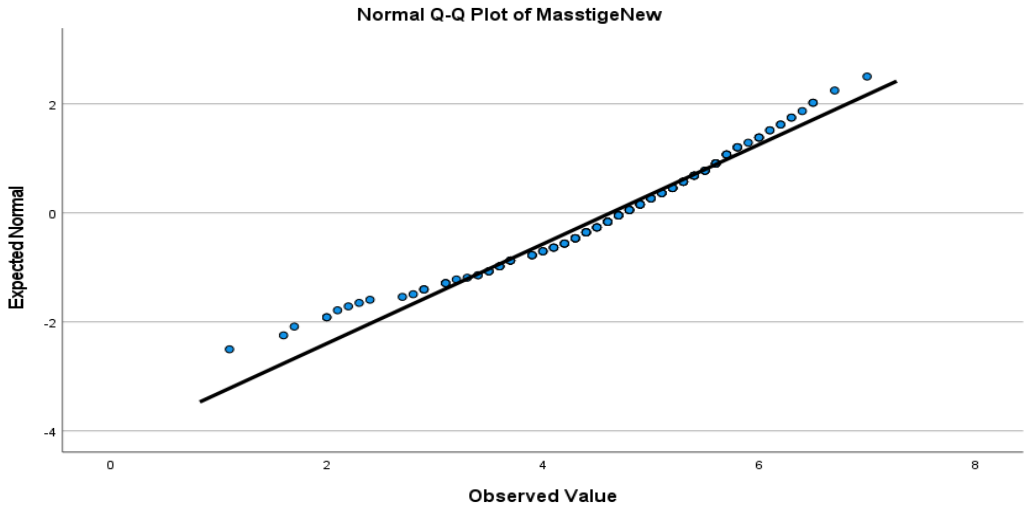


Table 11. Age wise comparative analysis of masstige consumption

Test Statistics [a, b]	
Masstige Consumption	
Kruskal-Wallis H	1.227
d f	3
Asymp. Sig.	.746
a. Kruskal Wallis Test	
b. Grouping Variable: Age group	

5. Discussions

The present study investigated two research questions: (RQ1) Does subjective social status (SSS) affect masstige brand consumption? and (RQ2) Is there a difference in SSS and masstige brand consumption between age groups?

RQ1: How does SSS affect masstige brand consumption? The regression results show that SSS was a significant positive predictor of masstige brand consumption (B = 0.44, β = .295, p < .001), accounting for 8.7% of the variance. This findings suggests that Indian middle-class people with a perception of a higher social rank are more inclined towards the consumption of masstige brands. This aligns with the status consumption theory, which suggests that people consume to communicate, preserve, or improve their social status (Eastman et al., 1999; Han et al., 2010). Masstige brands fall somewhere between mass-market and luxury brands, providing prestige cues at affordable prices (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Truong et al., 2009; Paul, 2015). The results indicate that the perception of rank, not just income or education, influences the relationship between people and prestige-oriented brands (Adler et al., 2000).

Consumers who feel they have a higher status might choose to use masstige brands to assert and validate their status without the cost of luxury brands. The positive significant association indicates that Indian middle-class people use affordable luxury brands not only for self-enhancement but for self-maintainace as well.

To answer the RQ2 one-way ANOVA and Kruskal-Wallis H test was applied. The results revealed no significant differences in the target samples responses among both, the subjective social ranking groups, $F(3, 157) = 1.378$, $p = .251$, and their masstige brand consumptions, $H(3) = 1.227$, $p = .746$, across the four distinct age groups and otherwise the effect sizes of both the variables were small. For SSS, this means that individuals across the life stages had the same perception of their social ranks. Since SSS is a subjective, relative judgement, it can be based on each individual's own reference group, meaning that younger and older respondents can get similar ratings even if they have different incomes, career stages, or wealth. The similar levels by age group indicate that these brands are appealing across distinct generations for masstige brands consumption. Younger consumers might be attracted to them for aspirational and identity reasons, and older consumers might appreciate their quality and prestige. The takeaway is that the appeal of masstige could be more psychological than demographic, based on self-perceived status.

6. Theoretical contribution

First, the study contributes to the literature of masstige marketing strategy by introducing subjective social status as a psychological antecedent of masstige brand consumption. Previous studies have focused on brand-level factors like perceived prestige, brand attitude, and value perceptions (Paul, 2015; Truong et al., 2009). The results indicate that the self-perceived social hierarchy of consumers is a better predictor of their consumption of these brands than what the brand provides, thereby moving the focus from the brand to the consumer's perception of his or her social position.

Second, the findings provide empirical evidence for the status consumption and social comparison theories in the masstige context. The positive relationship between subjective social status and masstige brands consumption indicates that they serve as a more affordable status symbol. This means that status signalling is not limited to luxury consumption, and theories of conspicuous consumption and status consumption can be extended to more accessible brands.

Third, the study highlights the importance of perceived status, not just objective socioeconomic status, for consumer behaviour. The results lend support to the hypothesis that consumption decisions are based on perceived rank, which can differ from income or education (Adler et al., 2000).

Fourth, the non-significant age differences in both subjective social status and masstige consumption add a boundary-condition insight. They propose that the status-consumption mechanism is similar across all life stages, and that age may not be a required moderating or segmenting variable in this relationship. This contradicts the notion that status-driven consumption is limited to specific generational groups and calls for additional research on other demographic and psychographic boundary conditions.

7. Managerial Implications

First, masstige brand marketers need to focus on social aspiration and recognition, not just functional attributes. Consumers who perceive themselves as being higher in the social hierarchy, or who want to be perceived as such, are likely to be more receptive to communication that is linked to achievement, belonging, and higher social status.

Second, the subjective social status and the masstige brands consumption was not different across age groups, which suggests the brand managers that they do not need to create different age-specific positioning for masstige appeal. A consistent brand story based on status and prestige can be used across age groups, potentially lowering the cost and complexity of campaigns. Status orientation, lifestyle or aspirations are more likely to attract than age-based segmentation.

Third, the results can be applied to pricing and product strategy. Based on the positive relationship brand managers are suggested to position these brands at a premium but not a luxury price, backed by design, packaging and brand experience that communicate prestige and match to the status maintainace psychological need of the higher subjective social status groups. This positioning may appear attractive to individuals seeking to maintain their high social rank among the Indian middle-class consumers.

Fourth, retailers and brand managers can use status-relevant cues in their touchpoints, such as store ambience, brand storytelling, and endorsements by aspirational reference groups, to strengthen the perceived status value of the brand.

Lastly, because of the small effect size, managers should consider status perception as one of several levers. It should be used in conjunction with quality, brand image and price perception, not in isolation.

8. Limitations and future scope

Despite several meaningful contributions the study has some limitations that future researchers may address. First, the findings of this study is based on only 161 sampling units gathered using non-probability sampling technique and analysed using a simple linear regression in SPSS 27 therefore, reducing its generalisability. Second, the present study has treated subjective social status as a stable, trait-like perception, when in fact it is relative and context-dependent. Future research might explore its changes across reference group (community versus national comparison) and situational cues (social media exposure) to influence the consumption of masstige brands. Third, the study did not explore the psychological processes between perceived status and consumption. Future researchers might add depth into this relationship by explicitly introducing variables like self-enhancement motives, self maintainace motives, status anxiety, relative deprivation, or the need for belonging and social recognition, and whether compensatory motives are present among those who feel low in status. Fourth, individual differences were not considered as boundary conditions. The effect of perceived status on consumption may be reinforced or inhibited by dispositional factors (self-esteem, self-concept clarity, social comparison orientation, self-monitoring, and independent versus interdependent self-construal). The moderation analyses may reveal for whom and under what psychological conditions the effect is strongest. Therefore, future researches may consider these suggestions to add depth in masstige phenomenon and enhance its generalizability.

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Cite this Article:

***Ravi, " We Consume, Because We Belong: The Role of Masstige Brands in Sustaining Relative Social Status and Social Standing"**, Ved International Journal of Arts, Commerce and Technology (VIJACT), ISSN: 3139-1656 (Online), Volume 2, Issue 10, pp. 18-30, Oct 2026.*
Journal URL: https://vijact.com
DOI: https://doi.org/10.65785/vijact.v2i10.132

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