

Dreaming Big, Spending Smart: Luxury Versus Mass Branding in Aspirational India

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Abstract—India’s expanding middle class has emerged as a decisive force reshaping consumption pattern and redefining the boundaries between luxury and mass markets. Traditionally associated with value-driven and frugal purchasing behaviour, the contemporary Indian middle-class family is increasingly guided by aspirations for status, quality, emotional gratification, and experiential value. This shift has created a complex consumption environment where luxury and mass brands coexist, compete, and often converge to address evolving consumer expectations. The Indian luxury market, in particular, is no longer driven exclusively by high-net-worth individuals but is witnessing growing participation from aspirational consumers seeking symbolic value and personal achievement through branded consumption.

This study examines the changing dynamics between luxury and mass branding in the context of India’s aspirational middle-class families. It explores how rising disposable incomes, urbanization, dual-income households, and enhanced access to flexible financing options have influenced consumer preferences across essential, discretionary, and luxury categories. The research highlights the strategic responses of brands, including tiered product offerings, affordable luxury formats, miniaturized premium products, and innovative pricing mechanisms such as EMIs and Buy Now Pay Later (BNPL) schemes, which enable aspirational consumers to access premium experiences without compromising value consciousness.

By analyzing consumer perceptions, purchasing motivations, and brand engagement patterns, the study seeks to understand how middle-class families negotiate the trade-off between affordability and aspiration. The findings underscore the emergence of a distinctly Indian luxury market one that blends achievement-oriented consumption with cultural pride, quality appreciation, and pragmatic spending behaviour. The study contributes to existing literature by offering insights into how luxury and mass brands can strategically position themselves to build long-term brand loyalty among

India’s aspirational middle class. It provides valuable implications for marketers and brand strategists aiming to align their offerings with the evolving aspirations of one of the world’s most influential consumer segments.

Index Terms—Brand Loyalty, Luxury Market, Consumer Perceptions, Premium Pricing, Consumer Behaviour, Luxury Brands, Perceived Value, Marketing strategy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the years, India’s middle class has become one of the most influential forces shaping the country’s consumer markets. What once revolved largely around careful budgeting and necessity-driven purchases has gradually shifted toward a more aspiration-led way of consuming. Rising incomes, better job opportunities, and increased exposure to global lifestyles have altered how middle-class families think about spending. Consumption today is not just about fulfilling needs; it is increasingly about improving everyday living, celebrating progress, and making choices that reflect personal and social aspirations.

This change is particularly visible in how Indian consumers relate to brands. For many middle-class families, brands are no longer evaluated only on price or functionality. They are seen as markers of quality, reliability, and sometimes even personal achievement. Owning a better smartphone, upgrading to a well-designed car, or choosing a premium personal care product often carries emotional significance. In this context, luxury is not always about exclusivity in the traditional sense. It is about “better” better materials, better performance, better experience. Brands such as Titan, Tanishq, and Fabindia illustrate this shift well, offering products that feel premium and aspirational while still remaining accessible to a broad middle-class audience.

India's economic growth has made these choices more achievable. Higher disposable incomes, especially in urban areas, have increased spending on categories such as automobiles, electronics, fashion, and lifestyle products. Dual-income households have further strengthened this trend, allowing families to plan discretionary purchases that were once considered indulgent. The growing popularity of brands like Hyundai, Tata Motors, Apple, and Samsung among middle-class consumers reflects a desire to balance aspiration with perceived value. These brands succeed not merely because of status appeal, but because they offer a sense of justified premium products that feel worth paying extra for.

At the same time, value consciousness continues to play a strong role in shaping purchase decisions. Indian middle-class consumers may aspire to premium brands, but they rarely abandon careful evaluation. Price, durability, and long-term usefulness remain central considerations. This has pushed both luxury and mass brands to rethink their strategies. Luxury brands can no longer rely solely on high price points and exclusivity, while mass brands are increasingly adding premium cues to their offerings. The success of brands like Maruti Suzuki's higher-end models or Tata's repositioning through design and safety reflects this changing mindset.

FMCG and lifestyle brands provide some of the clearest examples of this convergence. Companies such as Hindustan Unilever, ITC, and Dabur have introduced premium sub-brands and smaller pack sizes that allow consumers to experience higher-quality products without a large financial commitment. Similarly, beauty and personal care brands like Lakmé and Forest Essentials cater to different levels of aspiration within the same household. These strategies acknowledge a simple reality: middle-class consumers are willing to trade up, but they prefer to do so gradually and on their own terms.

Access has also played an important role in reshaping luxury consumption. Flexible payment options such as EMIs, Buy Now Pay Later schemes, and easy digital credit have reduced the psychological burden of high-ticket purchases. Whether it is buying a smartphone, a two-wheeler, or home appliances, these options allow families to align aspiration with affordability. As a result, luxury and premium consumption in India often feels less like a sudden leap and more like a steady progression.

Beyond income and access, cultural factors deeply influence middle-class consumption. Purchases are often tied to life events festivals, weddings, promotions, or milestones which add emotional meaning to brand choices. Buying gold from a trusted brand like Tanishq, upgrading a television during Diwali, or investing in a better car after a career advancement reflects how consumption is woven into family narratives. In such cases, brands become part of personal stories rather than mere products.

What is emerging, therefore, is a distinctly Indian understanding of luxury one that blends ambition with practicality and pride with restraint. Middle-class families are not seeking excess; they are seeking value that feels earned and meaningful. For brands, this means that success lies not in imposing global definitions of luxury, but in understanding the lived realities and aspirations of Indian consumers. Brands that respect this balance are more likely to earn trust, loyalty, and long-term relevance.

In this evolving context, examining the relationship between luxury and mass branding among India's aspirational middle-class families becomes especially important. Understanding how consumers move between these two spaces, how they justify premium spending, and how they assign meaning to brands offers valuable insights into the future of Indian consumption. As the middle class continues to grow and mature, its influence will remain central to shaping both market strategies and consumer culture in India.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

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III. METHODOLOGY

1. Research Design:

This study employs a quantitative, empirical research design using a survey-based approach to investigate customers perceptions on brands. This approach allows for statistical analysis of relationships between customers perceptions, demographic variables, and perceived fairness, trust, and transparency in brands.

2. Brand awareness and brand loyalty:

The target population for this research includes customers of urban, semi-urban and rural places across major Indian cities.

3. Data Collection Instrument:

Data is collected using a structured online questionnaire designed to capture multiple dimensions of customers perceptions. The questionnaire includes the following sections:

1. Demographic Information – Age, gender, educational background, work experience, and sector of application.
2. Brand Awareness and Familiarity – Customers familiarity with brands and prior experience.

3. Trust and Reliability – Perceptions of the reliability and trust on the product.
4. Fairness and Transparency – Perceived bias, transparency, and ethical considerations
5. Overall Satisfaction and Acceptance – Customers satisfaction and willingness of the products.

All items are measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (5), ensuring ease of response and statistical compatibility.

4. Data Collection Procedure:

The questionnaire is distributed electronically through email, social media platforms (LinkedIn, Twitter), and professional networks. Respondents are informed about the purpose of the study, assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and provided consent before participation. Data collection is conducted over a period of 6 weeks to ensure adequate responses and representation from different sectors and demographics.

5. Data Analysis Techniques:

The following analysis techniques are employed:

1. Descriptive Statistics – Mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage distributions to summarize demographic characteristics and general trends in customers perceptions.
2. Reliability Analysis – Cronbach's alpha to measure internal consistency of the questionnaire scales.
3. Correlation Analysis – Pearson correlation to examine relationships between trust, fairness, transparency, and overall acceptance of brand image.
4. Regression Analysis – To identify predictors of customers' acceptance and satisfaction with brands.
5. ANOVA/T-tests – To assess differences in perceptions based on demographic variables (age, gender, sector, work experience).

6. Ethical Considerations:

The study adheres to strict ethical standards. Participants are informed of their rights to withdraw at any time, data is kept confidential, and findings are reported in aggregate form without identifying individual respondents. The survey is voluntary, and no personal identifiers are collected, ensuring

compliance with research ethics and data privacy norms.

7. Limitations of Methodology

- The study relies on self-reported perceptions, which may introduce response bias.
- Proposed sample targeted to 50 samples only.
- The survey is limited to candidates' brand loyalty and brand image exposure.

IV. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The future of luxury brand management in India is extremely promising. As consumer spending grows and global brands continue entering the Indian market, the demand for skilled luxury professionals is at an all-time high. From fashion houses to luxury automobiles and high-end hospitality, organisations are actively seeking managers who understand luxury behaviour, digital trends, and brand heritage.

The rise of sustainable luxury, experiential retail, and personalised shopping experiences is further reshaping the industry. Whether you are passionate about fashion, design, innovation, or premium lifestyle products, luxury brand management offers a pathway to a world of global opportunities.

V. KEY BOUNDARIES OF THE STUDY

1. Sector Focus: FMCG sectors in India.
2. Population: Customer preferences between luxury vs brand loyalty.
3. Geographical Limitation: Urban, semi-urban and rural centres in India.
4. Dimension of Study: Customer perceptions focusing on brand loyalty, product quality and pricing strategy, brand image, social status.
5. Methodological Limitation: The study is survey-based and cross-sectional, capturing perceptions at a single point in time rather than longitudinal changes.

By defining these boundaries, the study maintains a clear focus on customer preferences, brand attractions, product status aesthetics on how it reflects in the society, providing actionable insights while laying the groundwork for future research in luxury vs mass branding.

VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The significance of this study lies in its ability to provide customer perceptions of products status and brand image in India, a market that is increasingly attracting loyal customers, understanding how customers perceive the image of mass product vs luxury branding.

VII. ACADEMIC SIGNIFICANCE

From a scholarly perspective, this research addresses a notable gap in the literature regarding image of the brands vs loyalty among customers within the Indian context. By examining variables such as ethical practices of companies, growing body of experience of sustainable practices, green initiatives and quality of products which are introduced in the market.

VIII. SOCIETAL SIGNIFICANCE

On a broader level, this research contributes to the societal understanding of consumer behaviour, integration of sustainable practices, benefits and business ethics.

IX. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

1. Heterogeneity: India presents extreme cultural, linguistic and regional diversity making generalized conclusions challenging. Consumer perceptions of luxury and mass brands are region specific and influenced by local traditions, festivals and societal norms.
2. Cultural-Psychological Factors: Luxury consumption in India is deeply intertwined with social identity, collective family values and ethnic heritage, complicating the application of western models of luxury behaviour.
3. Income Disparity: The wide income range from affluent elites to aspirational middle-class consumers leads to different price sensitivities and purchase behaviours, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings across all socioeconomic strata.
4. Market Segmentation Challenges: High taxation, import duties and luxury scarcity skew both consumption patterns and survey responses, especially in non-metro regions versus urban hubs.

X. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1. **Inputs:** This refers to the marketing messages and imagery a consumer receives while they are going through a decision-making process. Inputs also refers to any perceptions and attitudes that come from the consumer social environment such as friends, family and culture.
2. **Perceptual and Learning Constructs:** It includes needs, preferences and goals.
3. **Output:** The output is the customers resulting action under the influence of marketing messages, social stimuli and internal psychological attributes. It can result in the customer paying more attention to a certain brand over another.
4. **External Variables:** This is anything that is not directly related to the decision-making process, such as weather or religion that still may sway the customers decision.

XI. HYPOTHESES

Based on the conceptual framework and literature review, the study proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Higher levels of trust in Brands are positively associated with customers' acceptance and satisfaction.

H2: Consumers have a positive perception regarding premium pricing of luxuries.

XII. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Based on the survey responses and subsequent analysis, the following key findings emerged regarding consumer perception towards luxury and mass branding among India's aspirational middle-class families:

1. Overall Perception of Buying Behaviour:

A large segment of respondents reflected a neutral to moderately positive outlook towards luxury brands. While they admired the prestige and emotional satisfaction associated with premium labels, price sensitivity and practicality continued to steer their day-to-day purchases towards mass brands. The middle class showcased a dual mindset-one that aspires for luxury but acts with caution.

2. Trust and Transparency Issues:

Nearly two-thirds of consumers expressed skepticism towards luxury brand claims, particularly those

promoting "authentic exclusivity" or "heritage craftsmanship." Respondents felt that mass brands appeared more transparent and relatable, whereas luxury brands often projected elitism without adequate emotional connection.

3. Brand Image vs. Accessibility:

Participants appreciated luxury brands for their superior design and symbolic value, but many highlighted that such products cannot replace the functional dependence on mass brands. In essence, luxury builds aspiration, but mass branding sustains routine consumption-forming a complementary, not competitive, relationship.

4. Perceptions of Bias in Branding:

Almost half of the participants perceived that luxury marketing often glorifies urban elitism and fails to resonate with middle-income consumers from smaller towns. In contrast, mass brands were viewed as more inclusive, creating campaigns that celebrated diversity, affordability, and emotional bonding.

5. Emotional Comfort and Purchase Confidence:

Respondents shared that purchasing luxury products occasionally led to social anxiety or guilt, as they feared being judged for "overspending." In contrast, mass-brand shopping offered a sense of comfort, familiarity, and validation, making it a safer psychological choice for family-oriented buyers.

6. Generational Differences:

The analysis revealed distinct generational variations in attitudes:

- Gen Z consumers viewed luxury as a symbol of personal achievement and digital influence, often associating it with lifestyle expression rather than exclusivity.
- Millennials balanced aspiration with pragmatism-they admired luxury but demanded value alignment, sustainability, and social meaning.
- Gen X consumers remained more brand-loyal to mass products, prioritizing reliability, affordability, and long-term utility over symbolic prestige.

7. Awareness and Knowledge Gap:

Many respondents admitted to having limited understanding of luxury branding strategies, particularly regarding brand heritage, pricing logic, and global value perception. This lack of awareness

often led to misconceptions, with some perceiving luxury merely as “overpriced indulgence” rather than a reflection of craftsmanship and legacy. On the other hand, mass brands were better understood, as their communication and marketing messages were simpler, more relatable, and consistent with middle-class sensibilities.

8. Perceived Impact on Purchase Opportunities:

A significant proportion of respondents believed that luxury consumption in India tends to favour individuals with stronger social and digital presence—such as influencers or high-income professionals. Families with modest earnings or limited exposure felt that the luxury ecosystem is not built for them, thus reinforcing a psychological divide. Conversely, mass brands were seen as empowering and democratic, catering to every household irrespective of income tier.

9. Preference for Hybrid Consumption Models:

Respondents widely supported a hybrid approach to consumption, balancing aspiration with accessibility. They expressed a desire for “affordable luxury”-brands that offer premium aesthetics and quality within reachable price ranges. This shift toward “mass-tige” (mass + prestige) branding indicates a strong preference for middle-ground experiences, where emotional pride meets financial comfort.

10. Sectoral Variations in Brand Acceptance:

The study revealed distinct variations across product categories. Consumers were more open to luxury spending in sectors like fashion, gadgets, and travel—where brand image enhances social identity. However, in FMCG, household goods, and groceries, the preference remained firmly with mass brands, due to daily usage, price sensitivity, and value-for-money orientation.

XIII. OVERALL INSIGHT

The findings suggest that while India’s aspirational middle class is increasingly drawn to luxury narratives, the transition from desire to purchase is still moderated by economic prudence, social perception, and brand accessibility. The future of branding in this segment lies not in polarizing luxury versus mass, but in blending exclusivity with inclusivity.

Consumers are seeking brands that resonate emotionally, reflect upward mobility, and retain

authenticity. Hence, the “luxury-for-all” mindset—driven by hybrid branding, ethical storytelling, and localized communication—emerges as the new strategic frontier for India’s evolving consumer base.

XIV. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Adopt a Hybrid Branding Strategy:

Brands should balance luxury appeal with mass accessibility by integrating elements of prestige within affordable formats. Introducing bridge lines or affordable luxury collections can allow aspirational middle-class families to experience exclusivity without financial discomfort. This hybrid strategy strengthens emotional aspiration while sustaining everyday relevance.

2. Enhance Transparency in Brand Communication:

Companies must clearly communicate pricing logic, product origins, and brand authenticity. Transparent storytelling regarding quality, craftsmanship, and sourcing can build trust among value-conscious middle-class consumers who are often skeptical about luxury mark-ups and exaggerated advertising narratives.

3. Regular Brand Audits to Ensure Equity:

Luxury and premium brands should periodically assess their marketing content, pricing models, and consumer reach to avoid social or regional bias. Conducting inclusive brand audits ensures fair representation of diverse income groups and prevents the perception that luxury is reserved only for urban elites.

4. Enhance Consumer Experience through Emotional Branding:

Brands must create experiential touchpoints that go beyond product ownership—through in-store personalization, cultural storytelling, and digital community engagement. This approach fosters emotional intimacy, making aspirational families feel valued rather than intimidated.

5. Consumer Awareness and Education Campaigns:

To bridge the knowledge gap about what defines “true luxury,” brands should design educational campaigns highlighting craftsmanship, heritage, and sustainability. When consumers understand why

luxury costs more, they develop appreciation instead of alienation.

6. Personalized Brand Engagement:

Adopting data-driven personalization-such as customized offers, localized campaigns, and lifestyle-based recommendations-can help brands build stronger emotional bonds. Middle-class families value recognition and belonging; personalization delivers precisely that.

7. Generationally Sensitive Brand Approaches:

Marketing strategies should align with age-specific aspirations and digital behaviour:

- Gen Z consumers respond better to influencer-driven, social media-centric storytelling.
- Millennials seek value-based luxury-sustainability, ethical sourcing, and emotional depth.
- Gen X consumers prefer trust-based, practical messaging that emphasizes durability and family values.

8. Expand Brand Access Beyond Metros:

Luxury and premium brands should actively penetrate Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities through pop-up stores, local partnerships, and digital-first retail experiences. This inclusivity will normalize aspirational consumption and expand the future customer base.

9. Sector-Specific Brand Adaptation:

Industries such as fashion, automobiles, and technology can emphasize aspirational luxury, while FMCG and household brands should focus on premiumization without alienation. Gradual adaptation ensures that consumers across sectors transition comfortably into the luxury mindset.

10. Build Ethical and Inclusive Brand Frameworks:

Companies should embed ethical practices, sustainability, and social inclusivity into their brand DNA. By supporting local artisans, eco-friendly packaging, and fair-trade production, brands can make luxury conscientious rather than conspicuous.

XV. OVERALL RECOMMENDATION

Luxury branding in India must evolve from exclusivity to inclusivity. The future lies in “democratized luxury”- where aspiration meets affordability, and prestige coexists with purpose. By combining

emotional storytelling, transparency, and localized engagement, brands can redefine luxury as not merely a status symbol but a reflection of progressive aspiration within India’s rising middle class.

XVI. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

While this study provides valuable insights into the evolving perceptions of luxury versus mass branding among India’s aspirational middle-class families, several promising avenues remain open for future exploration:

1. Longitudinal Studies:

Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how middle-class attitudes toward luxury evolve over time, especially as disposable income, lifestyle aspirations, and exposure to global culture continue to rise in India.

2. Cross-Cultural Comparisons:

Comparative studies between India and other emerging economies (such as China, Brazil, or Indonesia) could reveal how cultural values, social aspirations, and economic structures influence the balance between luxury desire and mass-brand loyalty.

3. Industry-Specific Investigations:

Further research focusing on specific product categories-such as fashion, automobiles, technology, and FMCG-would help identify sectoral nuances in consumer perception, emotional attachment, and purchasing motivation across different brand types.

4. Role of Ethical and Sustainable Branding:

Future studies could investigate how ethical practices, sustainability, and responsible luxury influence the trust and loyalty of middle-class consumers, particularly in a context where environmental consciousness is rapidly gaining importance.

5. In-Depth Generational Analysis:

Expanding on the generational variations observed, future research could explore how digital nativity, income progression, and social media influence shape Gen Z, Millennial, and Gen X preferences toward both luxury and mass branding.

6. Integration of Qualitative Insights:

Incorporating qualitative research methods such as interviews, focus groups, or ethnographic studies could provide richer, emotion-driven insights into how

families negotiate the emotional tension between aspiration and affordability in their consumption choices.

7. Brand Loyalty and Post-Purchase Behaviour:

Future studies may explore whether consumers who transition to luxury purchases demonstrate higher satisfaction, loyalty, or social signalling behaviour compared to those who remain consistent mass-brand users.

8. Impact on Brand Identity and Positioning:

Another significant research direction involves examining how luxury and mass brands adapt their positioning strategies to remain culturally relevant amid India's shifting socio-economic and psychological landscape.

9. Psychological Drivers of Aspiration:

Further research should investigate the psychological dimensions of aspiration-including self-concept, social comparison, and emotional gratification-to understand what truly motivates middle-class consumers to "trade up" toward luxury experiences.

10. Hybrid Branding Models and Their Effectiveness: Since this study indicates a growing preference for affordable luxury and hybrid consumption patterns, future research could empirically test different hybrid brand models to determine which combinations best balance exclusivity with accessibility.

This study thus lays the groundwork for broader academic inquiry and managerial experimentation into the evolving intersection of luxury and mass branding in India. It encourages future scholars to critically examine how brands can harness aspiration responsibly-without alienating inclusivity, cultural identity, or economic reality.

XVII. CONCLUSION

The Indian middle class today stands at a fascinating intersection of economic progress and emotional aspiration, redefining the boundaries between luxury and mass consumption. This study reveals that while luxury brands symbolize achievement, sophistication, and self-expression, mass brands continue to dominate through trust, accessibility, and cultural relatability. The aspirational consumer does not seek to abandon mass products but rather to integrate luxury

experiences into their evolving lifestyle-signalling the emergence of a hybrid consumption culture that blends affordability with ambition.

The findings highlight a crucial paradigm shift: luxury is no longer defined solely by exclusivity, but by inclusivity with purpose. Middle-class consumers increasingly expect luxury brands to mirror their values-sustainability, transparency, emotional authenticity, and local relevance. This evolution suggests that the future of branding in India lies not in creating sharper divides between luxury and mass segments, but in harmonizing them through innovative, ethical, and emotionally intelligent strategies.

For marketers and brand strategists, the key takeaway is clear-the next decade of consumer growth will not be driven by either status-seeking extravagance or price-driven loyalty, but by the fusion of aspiration and accessibility. Brands that successfully balance these forces-offering meaningful luxury for the many, not just the few-will lead the transformation of India's consumer landscape.

This study affirms that the future of branding in India is democratic, dynamic, and deeply emotional. Luxury and mass will no longer exist as opposites, but as co-creators in a shared narrative of progress, pride, and possibility-reflecting the true spirit of India's aspirational middle class.

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