

Original Research

Brand Aspirations Amid Economic Precarity: Consumption Desires among Low-Income Women in Urban Bangladesh

Priyanka Sharma¹ and Arjun Mehta³

¹ Department of Sociology, University of Delhi, Delhi, India.

² Department of Social Science, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India.

Corresponding Author: Author Name; Arjun Mehta;

Email: arjun.mehta.socialresearch@gmail.com

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Abstract

Background

Branded consumption among low-income women in urban Bangladesh is often misunderstood as luxury-seeking or materialistic behaviour. However, branded products may carry deeper social meanings related to dignity, respectability, cleanliness, and social belonging.

Objective

This study examines branded consumption aspirations among low-income women in urban Bangladesh and explores how branded goods become socially meaningful under conditions of economic constraint.

Method

A mixed-methods cross-sectional study was conducted among 50 low-income women living in Dhaka, Savar, and Gazipur. Quantitative data were collected through structured questionnaires, while qualitative insights were gathered through case-based interviews on purchase experiences, social pressures, and coping strategies.

Results

Findings show that branded products are strongly linked to social evaluation, self-confidence, workplace credibility, and perceptions of modernity. Social media exposure, peer comparison, and workplace expectations influenced participants' brand aspirations. Despite financial hardship, women maintained these aspirations through strategies such as buying sachets, replicas, second-hand branded goods, and lower-cost brands.

Conclusion

Branded consumption among low-income women should be understood as a socially embedded survival strategy shaped by gendered expectations, media-driven comparison, and urban vulnerability, rather than irrational spending behaviour. The study recommends consumer awareness initiatives, media literacy programs, and community-based financial resilience support.

Highlights/Key Point of Article

- Branded products help low-income women maintain dignity, confidence, and social acceptance.
- Social media, peers, and workplace expectations strongly influence their brand aspirations.
- Even with limited income, they use sachets, replicas, low-cost brands, and second-hand goods.

Keywords— Branded consumption, aspiration, low-income women, respectability, urban Bangladesh, social comparison, media influence

1. Introduction

Urbanization in Bangladesh has significantly transformed patterns of social life, identity formation, and consumption behaviour, particularly among low-income populations living in densely populated urban environments. In urban settings, branded products such as cosmetics, clothing, mobile phones, and personal care items increasingly carry symbolic meanings related to dignity, modernity, and social acceptance. Although many

low-income households continue to experience financial hardship and vulnerability to economic shocks, aspirations for branded consumption remain strong (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2023). From an economic perspective, spending on branded products by financially constrained households may appear irrational; however, sociological perspectives suggest that consumption decisions are often influenced by social pressure, identity construction, and the desire for belonging

rather than economic utility alone. Veblen's (1899/2009) theory of conspicuous consumption explains how visible goods operate as status symbols that communicate social position, while Bourdieu (1984) argued that consumption practices and tastes function as markers of social distinction and respectability. These theories suggest that branded goods may become socially important even among economically disadvantaged groups because they influence how individuals are judged in everyday social interactions. The concept of aspiration further helps explain why low-income individuals continue pursuing branded consumption despite limited financial resources. Appadurai (2004) argued that aspiration is socially and culturally shaped, meaning that individuals develop desires and future-oriented goals through social exposure and cultural experience. For low-income women in urban Bangladesh, branded products may therefore represent more than material possessions; they may symbolize confidence, dignity, and social mobility. Gendered expectations also intensify these pressures. Women are often socially evaluated through appearance, cleanliness, and self-presentation, making branded cosmetics, clothing, and grooming products important tools for maintaining respectability and social acceptance (Skeggs, 1997). Consumer culture further reinforces these expectations by linking branded products with femininity, confidence, and personal value (McRobbie, 2004). The growth of social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube has intensified exposure to branded lifestyles and consumer culture in Bangladesh. Continuous exposure to influencers, advertisements, and peer lifestyles increases social comparison and shapes perceptions of what is considered normal or desirable (DataReportal, 2025). Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory explains that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others, which may increase feelings of exclusion and pressure to maintain socially acceptable appearances. Studies in Bangladesh also suggest that social media advertising significantly influences purchasing behavior and brand preferences among consumers (Nobi et al., 2023). Despite growing research on branding and consumer behavior, limited studies have focused specifically on low-income urban women in Bangladesh and how they negotiate branded consumption under

conditions of economic constraint and social pressure. Therefore, this study explores how branded consumption aspirations among low-income women in urban Bangladesh are shaped by social expectations, media influence, workplace experiences, and struggles for dignity and belonging.

2. Objective

General Objective

To explore the branded consumption aspirations of low-income women in urban Bangladesh and examine the social, cultural, and economic factors influencing their consumption behaviour.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the types of branded products used by low-income women in urban Bangladesh and their frequency of purchase.
- To examine the socio-cultural motivations behind branded consumption, including social acceptance, personal satisfaction, quality perception, and fashion trends.
- To analyse the relationship between branded products and women's sense of identity, dignity, confidence, and social respectability.
- To investigate the influence of social media, advertising, and peer networks on branded consumption aspirations and purchasing decisions.
- To explore the affordability challenges and coping strategies adopted by low-income women in maintaining branded consumption under financial constraints.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods cross-sectional research design to explore branded consumption aspirations among low-income women in urban Bangladesh. The study was conducted in selected urban and peri-urban areas of Dhaka, Savar, and Gazipur, where rapid urbanization and economic vulnerability strongly shape everyday consumption practices. The target population consisted of low-income women involved in occupations such as garment work, domestic labour, small businesses, day labour, and unpaid household responsibilities. A total of 50 respondents participated in the study. A non-probability purposive sampling technique was

used to select participants who had direct experience with branded products and lived under financially constrained conditions. Convenience and snowball sampling approaches were also applied to access respondents within local communities. Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included sections on demographic characteristics, types of branded products used, purchasing frequency, socio-cultural motivations for branded consumption, media and peer influence, and affordability challenges. In addition, qualitative interviews were conducted with selected participants to gather deeper insights into personal experiences, workplace pressures, social expectations, and coping strategies related to branded consumption. Data collection was carried out through face-to-face interviews to ensure better understanding and participation among respondents with different educational backgrounds. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages to identify patterns in branded consumption behaviour. Qualitative responses were analysed thematically to explore recurring themes related to dignity, respectability, social comparison, workplace credibility, and adaptive consumption strategies. Ethical considerations were maintained throughout the research process by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity of the respondents.

4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis

The study collected data from 50 low-income women living in urban areas of Dhaka, Savar, and Gazipur. The findings show that the majority of respondents were above 35 years of age, had low levels of formal education, and belonged to medium-sized households. Most respondents were engaged in small business activities, garment work, domestic labour, or informal occupations, reflecting the economically vulnerable nature of the sample population.

The findings from table 1 indicate that more than half of the respondents (52%) were over 35 years old, while 82% had educational qualifications of SSC or below. Most participants were married

(86%), and more than half lived in households consisting of five to seven family members.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 50)

Variables	Categories	N	%
Age Group	≤25 years	6	12
	26–30 years	14	28
	31–34 years	4	8
	>35 years	26	52
Educational Qualification	SSC or below	41	82
	HSC	9	18
Marital Status	Married	43	86
	Single	7	14
Family Size	2–4 members	13	26
	5–7 members	27	54
	> 8 members	10	20
Main Source of Income	Day labour	5	10
	Small business	24	48
	Domestic work	11	22
	Garment worker	10	20

Small business activities represented the primary source of income for nearly half of the respondents (48%).

The study found that branded products were strongly associated with dignity, social acceptance, and workplace credibility. Respondents reported using branded cosmetics, soaps, shampoos, clothing, and mobile phones to maintain a socially acceptable appearance. Many participants believed that branded products helped them appear clean, modern, and respectable in public and workplace settings.

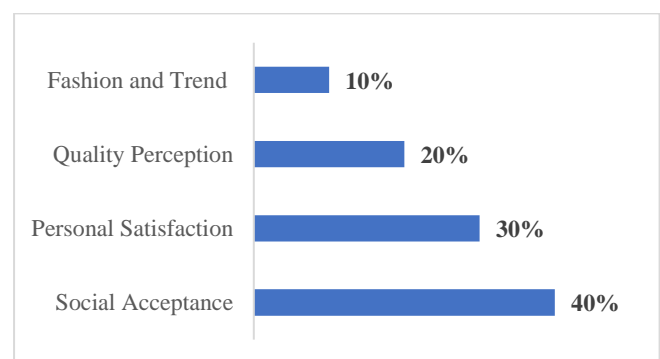


Figure 1: Major Motivations Behind Branded Consumption

The figure shows that social acceptance was the most significant motivation behind branded consumption among respondents. Many women expressed fear of social judgment and exclusion if they failed to maintain an acceptable appearance through branded products.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube significantly influenced respondents' aspirations for branded products. Participants reported that advertisements, influencer content, and peer lifestyles shaped their perceptions of modernity and desirable lifestyles.

Table 2: Sources of Influence on Branded Consumption

Sources of Influence	N	%
Social Media	22	44
Friends and Peers	15	30
Television	8	16
Advertisements	5	10

The findings demonstrate that social media was the strongest source of influence on branded consumption aspirations, followed by peer influence. Respondents frequently compared themselves with co-workers, friends, and online personalities.

Despite limited financial resources, respondents continued pursuing branded consumption through adaptive strategies such as buying sachets, purchasing replicas, and using second-hand branded goods.

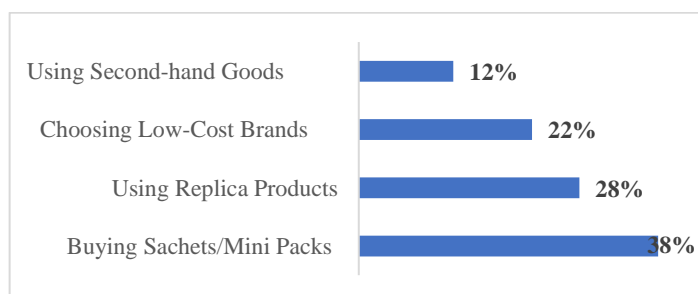


Figure 2: Common Coping Strategies Used by Respondents

The findings suggest that financial limitations did not eliminate aspiration for branded products. Instead, women adopted alternative consumption strategies that allowed them to maintain social dignity and inclusion while managing economic constraints.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed through thematic analysis based on selected case studies of low-income women from Dhaka, Savar, and Gazipur. The analysis focused on respondents' personal experiences, social pressures, workplace expectations, media influence, and financial coping strategies related to branded consumption. Several major themes emerged from the interviews.

Theme 1: Branded Products as Respectability

Many respondents viewed branded products as a way to appear clean, proper, and respectable in public. Branded cosmetics, soaps, shampoos, and clothing were not seen only as luxury items, but as tools for avoiding negative judgment. Women felt that using branded items helped them maintain dignity and social acceptance.

Theme 2: Workplace Appearance and Credibility

Women involved in small business, garment work, food selling, tailoring, and beauty-related work reported that branded appearance helped them gain trust from customers, co-workers, and clients. For them, branded products were connected to professional image and workplace confidence.

Theme 3: Media and Peer Influence

Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube played an important role in shaping brand desire. Respondents were influenced by advertisements, beauty tutorials, influencers, and peer discussions. Many women compared themselves with others and felt pressure to use branded products to avoid feeling inferior.

Theme 4: Coping with Financial Constraints

Although respondents had limited income, they did not completely give up branded consumption. Instead, they used coping strategies such as buying sachets, mini-packs, low-cost brands, replica products, and second-hand branded goods. These

strategies helped them access the social meaning of branded products at a lower cost.

Theme 5: Brands as Safety and Trust

Some respondents preferred branded products because they believed these items were safer and more reliable than unbranded products. This was especially common for cosmetics, soaps, shampoos, and hygiene products. Concerns about skin damage and counterfeit products made women more dependent on trusted brands.

Table 03: Summary of Qualitative Themes

Theme	Meaning	Example from Respondents
Respectability	Brands help women appear clean and socially acceptable	Branded grooming products used to avoid judgment

5. Results and Discussion

The findings of this study reveal that branded consumption among low-income women in urban Bangladesh is deeply connected to social dignity, respectability, and social acceptance rather than simple luxury-seeking behavior. Although the respondents belonged to economically vulnerable households, branded products remained important in their daily lives because these items were associated with cleanliness, confidence, professionalism, and belonging. The demographic findings showed that most respondents had low educational backgrounds, medium to large family sizes, and unstable or low-income occupations such as small business activities, garment work, domestic labor, and day labor. These economic realities indicate that participants managed branded consumption within highly constrained financial conditions. One of the most important findings of the study is that branded products functioned as tools of social respectability. Many respondents believed that using branded cosmetics, soaps, shampoos, and clothing helped them avoid negative judgment from others. This finding strongly supports Bourdieu's (1984) theory of distinction, which explains that consumption practices become markers of social identity and respectability. Women reported that appearance influenced how they were treated in workplaces,

Workplace credibility	Brands support professional image	Shop owners and parlour workers use brands to gain customer trust
Media and peer influence	Social media and friends increase brand desire	Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube influence product choices
Financial coping	Women use low-cost ways to access brands	Sachets, replicas, mini-packs, second-hand goods
Safety and trust	Brands are seen as safer and more reliable	Branded soaps and cosmetics preferred over unknown products

neighborhoods, and social gatherings. As a result, branded products became connected to dignity and self-worth. The findings also support Veblen's (1899/2009) theory of conspicuous consumption. However, unlike elite luxury consumption, the respondents practiced a localized and affordable form of symbolic consumption through small branded products such as soaps, shampoos, face wash, handbags, and mobile phones. These products functioned as visible signs of modernity and social inclusion. Another significant finding was the influence of workplaces on branded consumption behavior. Women working in customer-facing occupations believed that appearance affected customer trust and workplace acceptance. Respondents working in beauty parlors, small businesses, and food-selling occupations stated that branded appearance increased their professional credibility. This finding suggests that branded consumption was not only symbolic but also connected to livelihood and economic survival. The study further found that social media and peer influence played a major role in shaping consumption aspirations. Platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube exposed women to idealized lifestyles, beauty trends, and branded products. Respondents often compared themselves with peers, coworkers, and online influencers, creating pressure to maintain socially acceptable appearances. This finding aligns with Festinger's

(1954) social comparison theory, which argues that individuals evaluate themselves through comparison with others. Despite severe financial limitations, respondents did not abandon their aspirations for branded products. Instead, they adopted coping strategies such as buying sachets, using replica products, purchasing low-cost brands, and relying on secondhand branded goods. These adaptive strategies demonstrate that aspiration remained strong even when purchasing power was limited. This finding supports Appadurai's (2004) concept of the "capacity to aspire," which explains that aspirations continue to exist even under conditions of poverty and limited opportunity. The study also found that many women trusted branded products because they believed these products were safer and more reliable than unbranded alternatives. Concerns regarding counterfeit cosmetics and poor-quality hygiene products strengthened dependence on trusted brands. Therefore, branded consumption among low-income women carried both symbolic and practical meanings. The findings demonstrate that branded consumption among low-income women in urban Bangladesh should be understood as a socially embedded practice shaped by gendered expectations, media influence, workplace pressure, and struggles for dignity and belonging. Rather than irrational spending behavior, branded consumption represents an important strategy through which women negotiate identity, social acceptance, and self-respect within economically constrained urban environments.

.6. Conclusion and Future Scope

This study concludes that branded consumption aspirations among low-income women in urban Bangladesh are shaped by complex social, cultural, and economic realities. Although the respondents lived under significant financial constraints, branded products remained important because they were strongly associated with dignity, social acceptance, confidence, and respectability. The findings show that branded consumption is not simply motivated by luxury desires or materialism; rather, it functions as a social strategy for managing public judgment, maintaining workplace credibility, and achieving a sense of belonging within urban society. The study further reveals that social media exposure, peer influence, and workplace expectations significantly intensify aspirations for branded products. Platforms

such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube continuously expose women to idealized lifestyles and consumption trends, increasing social comparison and pressure to maintain acceptable appearances. At the same time, gendered expectations surrounding cleanliness, beauty, and self-presentation place additional pressure on women to engage in branded consumption practices. Despite limited purchasing power, the respondents did not abandon their aspirations for branded products. Instead, they adopted various coping strategies such as buying sachets, using low-cost brands, purchasing replica items, and relying on secondhand branded goods. These strategies allowed them to participate symbolically in branded culture while managing financial limitations. The findings also highlight that branded products carry practical meanings related to trust, hygiene, and product safety. Many respondents preferred branded products because they believed these items were more reliable and less harmful than unbranded alternatives. This study demonstrates that branded consumption among low-income women in urban Bangladesh should be understood within the broader context of urban inequality, gendered social expectations, media influence, and struggles for dignity and inclusion. The research contributes to understanding how economically vulnerable women negotiate identity, aspiration, and social survival through everyday consumption practices in urban environments.

Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. To protect participants' privacy and confidentiality, the dataset is not publicly shared.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this study.

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Authors' Contribution

Priyanka Sharma conceptualized and designed the study, developed the research framework, and supervised the overall research process. Arjun Mehta conducted the fieldwork, collected and analyzed the data, and prepared the initial draft of the manuscript. Both authors contributed to the interpretation of findings, critically revised the manuscript for intellectual content, and approved the final version for publication.

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