




## Research Article

## The Branded Self: Youth Identity, Social Media, and Consumer Culture in Kolkata


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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>The concept of brand has expanded beyond its economic role in modern urban societies and has become a powerful cultural icon that determines identity and social standing. This paper is entitled The Branded Self: Youth Identity, social media and Consumer Culture in Kolkata, and explores the effects of branded consumption on the development of youth identity and social image formation in a digitally mediated environment. Based on the primary data obtained via a structured survey on Google Forms, the study revolves around the preferences, motivations, and perceptions of branded products among the respondents, mostly between the age group of 18 and 30 years. The results show that, although quality is still one of the dominating factors in brand preference, symbolic elements like status enhancement, self-expression and social acceptance contribute significantly to influencing consumer behaviour. The social media platforms play a big role in such dynamics by promoting aspirational lifestyles and allowing people to compare themselves to others all the time. Influencers, advertisements and online content facilitate branded consumption as a norm of identity. Simultaneously, the paper finds that a critical viewpoint exists among the interviewees who oppose the idea of brands determining personality or intrinsic value. This brings out the presence of aspirational consumption and conscious resistance within youth culture. The study shows that the process of identity formation is not a purely brand-driven phenomenon, but it is an outcome of negotiation between personal values and social contexts, and economic conditions. This research paper will enrich the literature on consumer culture and symbolic consumption by providing empirical evidence from an Indian urban context. It highlights the two facets of brands as the instruments of self-expression and social coercion. Hence, the research findings advocate that branding, social media and youth identity are interconnected concepts in contemporary society, with significant implications for marketers, educators, and policymakers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397</li> <li>▪ Received: 01-03-2026</li> <li>▪ Accepted: 02-04-2026</li> <li>▪ Published: 11-04-2026</li> <li>▪ IJCRM:5(2); 2026: 510-517</li> <li>▪ ©2026, All Rights Reserved</li> <li>▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes</li> <li>▪ Peer Review Process: Yes</li> </ul>
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**KEYWORDS:** Youth culture, brand identity, social media, consumer behaviour, symbolic consumption.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With the fast-paced environment of globalisation and digital transformation, the process of consumption has been highly connected with identity formation. Brands are no longer solely a sign of quality, but they can also be used as cultural symbols, which refer to status, personality and lifestyle.

This symbolic aspect of consumption is important among the youth because identity construction is a process that is dynamic and constant, which is maintained through social interactions and cultural effects.

Theorists like Belk (1988) believe that possessions help in the extended self, which allows an individual to express themselves through what they possess. Likewise, Aaker (1997) highlights the phenomenon of brand personality in which the brands obtain human-like attributes that are associated with consumers. These perspectives throw light upon the growing importance of brands in the formation of self-concept and self-identity. Escalas and Bettman (2005) also indicate that people utilise the brands as symbolic resources to create and express their identity in a social setting.

This has been aggravated by the emergence of social media, which has made consumption very visible and performative. Social media, such as Instagram and Facebook, enable users to accomplish their identities based on their pictures, posts and interaction, which can be related to the theory of self-presentation by Goffman (1959). With such digital spaces, branded products are used as forms of impression management, as they allow users to create a positive impression on their peers. It has been found that influencers and online communities are important determinants in youth consumption habits and make aspirational lifestyles stronger (Djafarova and Rushworth, 2017). Nonetheless, such growing dependence on brands is a matter of serious concern. Although brands provide the possibilities of self-expression, they also may dictate the standardised ideals and might cause pressure to fit in. Bauman (2007) criticises consumer culture, asserting that identity has turned into a commodity, leading individuals to be increasingly defined by their consumption rather than their inherent identity.

This paper aims to examine these complexities in the face of Kolkata, a city that is culturally diverse and adopts digital technologies at a very high rate. Through consumer behaviour and perception analysis, the study will offer a very subtle insight into the impact of the brands on the identity and social image of the youth.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The growing penetration of the brands into our daily lives has made consumption one of the most important processes of identity formation, especially among young people. Branded products are usually linked with quality, status, and lifestyle in modern society, and hence are important indicators of social differentiation. Nevertheless, the degree of brand impact on identity and social image is still a debatable issue.

The growth of social media networks has enhanced the exposure to branded content, influencer marketing and peer comparison. The young people are always occupied in online spaces where

they do not just consume, but are also judged by other people. This would create a culture of aspirational consumption in which people would be driven to make decisions that would fit the socially constructed ideals. Hence, brands can be regarded as the means to achieve acceptance and create a desirable identity.

Meanwhile, not everybody is affected by these influences in the same manner. While there are people who accept branded consumption as a way of self-expression, there are also individuals who focus on functionality, cost, or personal values. These disjunctions point to the necessity to explore the different experiences and perceptions of young people towards branded products.

The primary research question, thus, is to find out how the youth identity and social image of adolescents in Kolkata are shaped by social media and brand-related social interactions. The paper is also aimed at investigating whether such an influence is felt as empowering or limiting, and how individuals negotiate themselves in a consumer-based world.

## 3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the youth consumer preferences and desires regarding the purchase of branded products.
2. To study the impact of social media and peer groups on the choice of brands.
3. To determine the contribution of brands to the youth identity and social image.

## 4. LITERATURE REVIEW

**Belk (1988)** observes that people use possessions to identify who they are, articulate their social status, and convey meanings in their lives. This point of view is specifically applicable in the situation of branded consumption, where the products serve as symbolic self-projections and help to build identity among the young population.

**Aaker (1997)** also advances this argument by bringing in the concept of brand personality, which argues that consumers ascribe human traits to brands. According to Aaker, the perceived personalities enable consumers to have an emotional attachment with brands, and this is what affects their preferences and loyalty. In this process, brands are used as self-expression where people identify themselves with a certain aspect like sophistication, excitement or reliability. This emotional attachment is particularly important in the case of young consumers who are actively involved in identity exploration.

**Escalas and Bettman (2005)** take the symbolic aspect of consumption a step further, believing that brands serve as an asset for building self-identity in the social environment. They show that people are selective in the adoption of the brands that are related to their desired social groups and avoid those that are associated with out-groups. They emphasise that such a selective association assist people in enhancing their self-concept and social belonging. Their contribution highlights the importance of brands in the process of social relationships and identity negotiation.

**Arnould and Thompson (2005)** give a more general socio-cultural approach to the analysis of consumption in their

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT). According to them, consumption is entrenched in the cultural discourses, marketplace ideologies, as well as in the identity projects. They affirm that it is impossible to explain consumer behaviour in the absence of a cultural and social framework that influences it. Their work reverses the emphasis of personal choice to those systems of meanings that determine the construction and performance of identities in the process of consumption.

**Kapferer (2012)** emphasises the importance of brands in modern society, which is cultural and symbolic. He claims that brands are the bearers of meaning, values and myths, which not only influence the preferences of the consumers, but also social identities. As he says, the brands are the cultural icon that allows people to express their way of life, status, and desires. This point of view is especially applicable to the urban environment, where the influence of global brands and media accentuates the impact of consumption on identity formation.

**Djafarova and Rushworth (2017)** discuss the increased role of social media in consumer behaviour with a specific focus on young people. According to them, social media influencers are extremely important in creating brand perceptions and making purchasing decisions. They show that influencers are relatable figures whose well-crafted lifestyles are likely to make followers follow the same consumption habits. This online mediation of the consumption increases the exposure of brands and alters the construction of identity into a performance in the online environment.

**Bauman (2007)** is also critical of the consumer culture as he insists that identity in contemporary society is commoditised. He argues that people are becoming more and more characterised by what they eat, and thus, the identity construction and reconstruction are in a constant cycle. The issue of identity instability is also evident in a consumer-oriented society because people have to adjust to the shifting trends and demands continuously. The questions that his work poses include the sustainability and authenticity of the identities created by consumption.

Altogether, these researchers prove that brands are not just economic products but strong social and symbolic instruments that are used to construct identities. Belk (1988), Aaker (1997) and Escalas and Bettman (2005) focus on the psychological and symbolic aspects of consumption, whereas Arnould and Thompson (2005) and Kapferer (2012) concentrate on the cultural ones. Simultaneously, Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) and Bauman (2007) give a piece of information about the role of digital media and the crucial importance of consumer culture. Combined, these opinions will create a whole picture of how young people interact with brands as a way of expressing, negotiating, and enacting their identities in a fast-changing consumer world.

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is based on three large theoretical perspectives: Symbolic Interactionism, Self- Concept Theory, and Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which in totality take into account the

connection between branded consumption and the development of youth identity.

According to Blumer (1969), in his work, the meaning that is created by people using symbols in social interactions defines Symbolic Interactionism. In this paper, brands serve as symbolic indicators via which the youth express identity, status and social affiliation. This point of view emphasises the fact that branded products are used as the means of social interaction and self-presentation.

The Self-Concept Theory, which was developed by Sirgy (1982), explains that consumers tend to buy the products and brands that match their self-image. People tend to select the brands that identify them with their real or ideal self, thereby adding identity to consumption.

Theory is especially applicable to the reasons why the youth are attracted to certain brands. Hence, these brands appeal to their dreams and social status. Consumer Culture Theory (Arnould and Thompson, 2005) is a more generalised socio-cultural approach; it focuses on the fact that consumption habits are mediated by cultural discourses, media factors and ideologies of the marketplace. It brings out the world of identity construction in a consumer-oriented society where brands and the media play a significant role.

Combined, these schemata describe how branded consumption as an identity-making, social, and symbolic means of communication is used by young people in Kolkata.

## 6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a **quantitative descriptive research design** based on primary data collected through a structured questionnaire using Google Forms. The research focuses on understanding the relationship between branded consumption and youth identity formation in Kolkata.

### 6.1. Sample and Data Collection

The sample size of the study was 36 respondents, sampled using the convenience method, most of them aged between 18 and 25 years, and some aged up to 30 years. The data was gathered through a structured questionnaire in Google Forms. Some of the questions were answered by all 36 responses and 35 valid responses, respectively, due to partial non-response. The analysis will be done on the basis of the responses available to each item, and the number of respondents (N) is clearly stated in the corresponding figures and tables to be transparent and accurate.

### 6.2. Nature of Data

The study is **primarily quantitative**, using a structured Likert scale and multiple-choice questions. Limited qualitative interpretation is also incorporated.

### 6.3 Tools of Analysis

- Frequency Distribution
- Percentage Analysis
- Mean Score

6.4. Data Collection Tool

Data was collected through **Google Forms**, allowing easy accessibility, anonymity, and efficient data recording.

7. DATA ANALYSIS

This section presents the statistical analysis of primary data collected through a Google Form survey. The responses are analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, including frequency distribution, percentage analysis, and mean score interpretation. Purchasing brands discloses an actual antithesis to the identity, earlier data:

7.1: Preference for Branded Products

**Prefer buying branded products** reveals a sharp contrast to the previous data on identity:

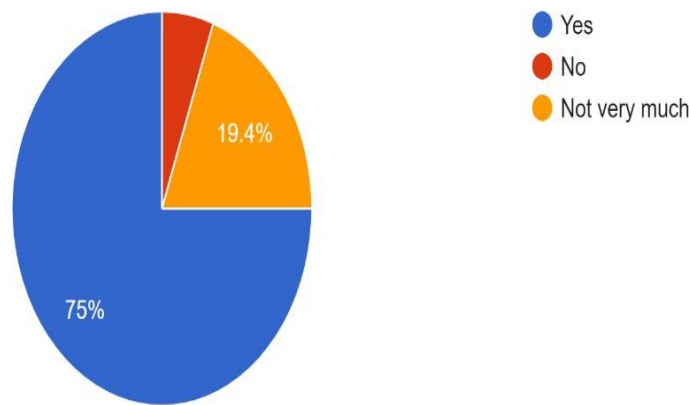


Figure 7.1: Preference for Branded Products  
Source: Google form responses

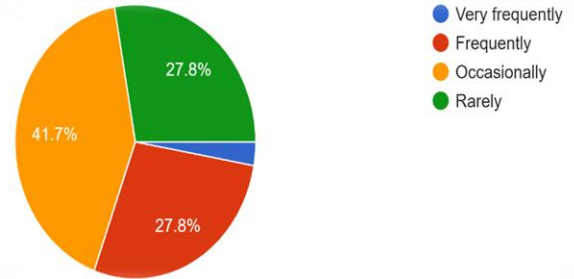
**Overshadowed Preference to Brand (75%):** Three-quarters of those surveyed (27 people) like purchasing branded goods.

**Low Rejection (5.6%):** A very low percentage indicates a stern No to branded commodities. **Ambivalent (19.4%):** The percentage of those who answer that way is around one-fifth of the respondents.

There is an interesting discontinuity between these charts. Although earlier data indicated that people were not using the brands to get a sense of their personality, this chart shows that they would much rather buy them anyway.

This implies the choice must be motivated by perception of quality or reliability, or habit over self-expression or social signalling. The "brand" as a product standard attracts the trust of people even though they may not consider it to be a part of their identity.

Frequency	Percentage	Estimated Count (out of 36)
Occasionally	41.7%	~15
Frequently	27.8%	~10
Rarely	27.8%	~10
Very Frequently	~2.7%*	~1



7.2: Branded Product Purchase Behaviour

Figure 7.2: Branded Product Purchase Behaviour  
Source: Google form responses

The statistics show that the consumer base is moderately involved with the brand and inclined to choose or make a purchase on occasion.

The statistics show a fairly involved but discriminating consumer segment, with branded buying not a habit. The most common category of purchaser is a branded product occasionally (41.7%), with a matching proportion (27.8% each) of consumers shopping now and then and once a month. The number of people who are consistently brand loyal is very small (2.7 per cent).

Generally speaking, branded products are treated as discretionary and are not considered essential, as almost 70 per cent of those who do it do so seldom, which creates significant opportunities to turn occasional consumers into regulars.

7.3: Significance of Brands in Purchasing.

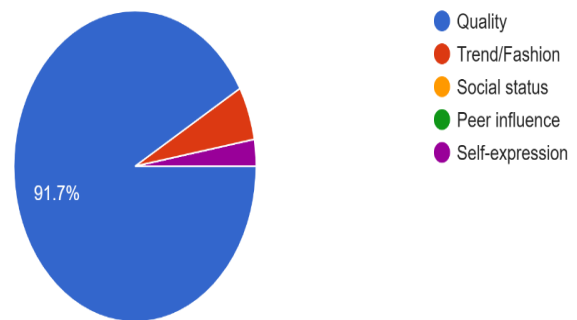


Figure 7.3. Significance of Brands in Purchasing.  
Source: Google form responses

The statistics indicate that the reason why the majority of people prefer branded products is quality (91.7%). Other aspects such as trend/fashion, social status, peer influence and self-expression are of little importance. What consumers highly value are branded products based on their perceived quality and reliability, but not based on social or fashion factors.

7.4: Role of Social Media in Choosing a Brand

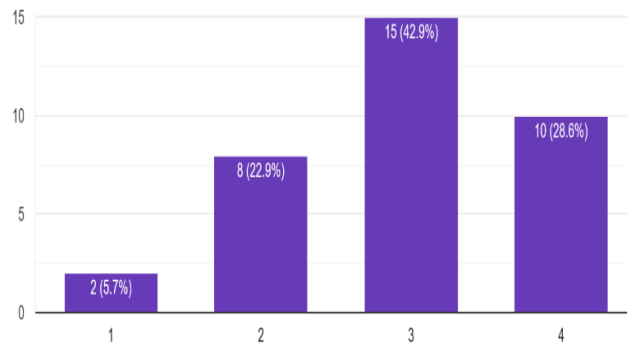


Figure 7.4: Role of Social Media in Choosing a Brand  
Source: Google form responses

The findings reveal an average rating of approximately 3.2, indicating a moderate level of impact of social media on brand choice. This suggests that apps like Instagram and Facebook play a role in shaping consumer tastes, but are not the sole influence.

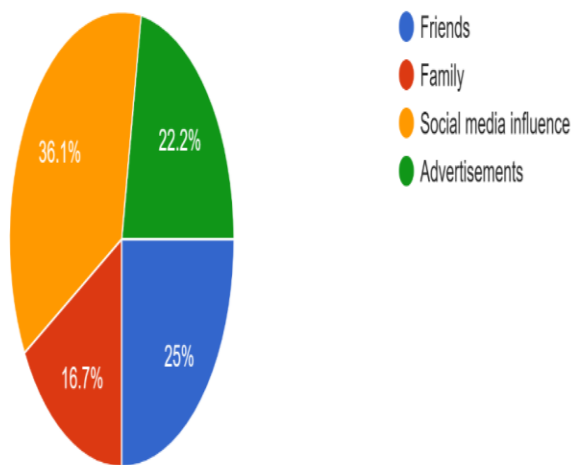


Figure 7.5: Factors which impact Brand Purchase Decisions  
Source: Google form responses

In the survey, the most influential factor in the decision to purchase the brand (36.1) is the influence of social media, which illustrates the supremacy of online sites. There is also a strong influence by peers, with friends (25%) playing an important role. The greatest effect is on advertisements (22.2%), followed by family (16.7%) and the least. Digitally-based consumer choices are becoming more peer-influenced rather than family and ad-driven as they have always been.

7.6: Branding and Social Status.

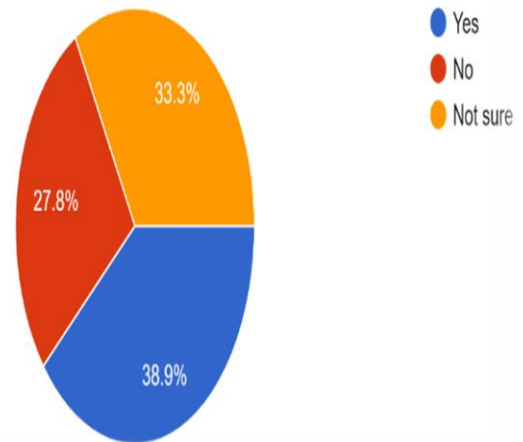


Figure 7.6: Branding and Social Status.  
Source: Google form responses

According to the responses (N = 36) made by 36 people, the results show that branding is a major factor in determining the perceived social status of the youth. One in four (38.9%) thinks branded products will actively contribute to their social status amongst peers. By far the largest share (33.3%): Not Sure, indicating that the connection between branding and social prestige is not something understood by all of us. The smallest group, 27.8%, only explicitly refutes that brands influence social standing. The results suggest that social signalling has been a key driver in brand consumption among this group, but its effect is unobtrusive or subliminal to a quarter of the participants.

7.7: Importance of Brand Image

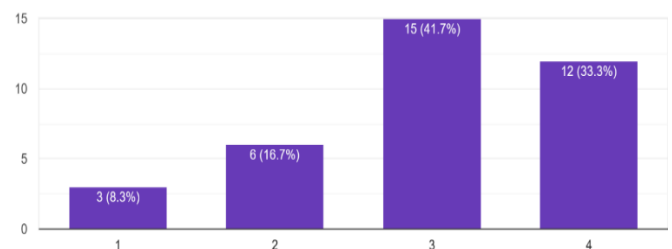


Figure 7.7: Importance of brand image  
Source: Google form responses

According to the 36 replies to how important brand image is:

- ❖ **High Importance (75%):** Scores of 3 and 4 are added together to indicate that overwhelmingly, brand image is an important consideration when purchasing a product.
- ❖ **Normal/Middle (41.7%):** The majority of the respondents (15 individuals) gave it a 3, which is very significant but may not be the determining factor.

❖ **Low Importance (25%):** Brand image has no or minimal influence on what the group buys (only a quarter of the group gives a score of 1 and 2).

This group of people is motivated by brand image, which supports prior statistics that this group of consumers wants to purchase branded products despite the lack of brand identity that those brands represent to them.

**7.8: Brands Reflect Personality and Identity**

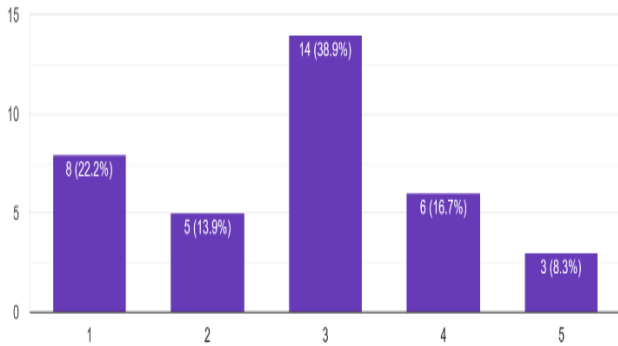


Figure 7.8: Brands reflect personality and identity  
Source: Google form responses

(ranked 1-5, where 1 is likely "Strongly Disagree", and 5 is "Strongly Agree"):

- ❖ **Neutrality Dominates (38.9%):** The most significant group (14 people) selected 3, meaning that they are neutral or do not know whether the brands represent themselves.
- ❖ **Strong leans toward disagreement:** The estates of 1 and 2 add up to approximately 36.1 per cent of people who feel that brands do not represent who they are.
- ❖ **Low Strong (8.3%):** One in every three people strongly believes that brands reflect on their personality.
- ❖ **Total Positive Sentiment:** And only a quarter of the group (score 4 and 5) perceives an obvious relationship between the brands and their personal identity.

Brands as a medium of self-expression are either neutral or sceptical to most respondents, as is the No/Sometimes trend in your last chart.

**7.9: Perceived Confidence from Branded Product Usage**

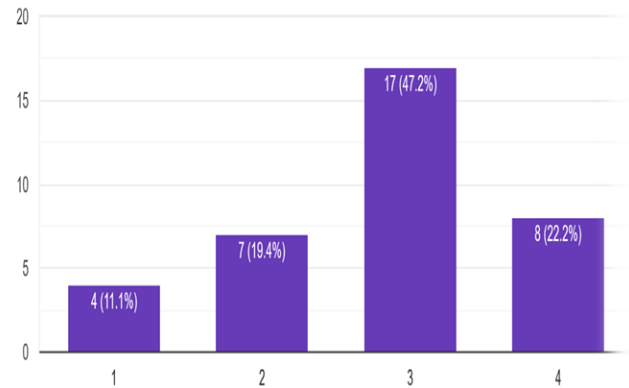


Figure 7.9: Perceived Confidence from Branded Product Usage  
Source: Google form responses

Most respondents (69.4% rated the statement as a 3 or 4) indicated that a majority of consumers believe a branded product to be associated with feeling more confident about themselves. There is a strong, though not absolute, dependence on brands as a source of psychological reassurance (top concentration of data in rating 3 with 47.2%). It seems that branding is more than a mere functional decision, as only 11.1% of people believed that it makes no difference to their confidence (rating 1). 11.1% of people believed that it makes no difference to their confidence (rating 1).

**7.10: Brand Usage for Lifestyle Expression Analysis**

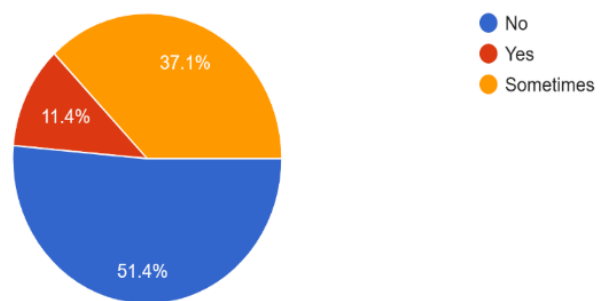
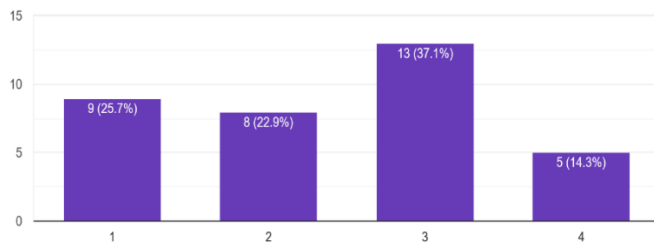


Figure 7.10: Brand Usage for Lifestyle Expression Analysis  
Source: Google form responses

According to a survey made of 35 respondents on the topic of brand expression, Most (51.4%) responded " No: Over 50 per cent of those surveyed do not buy branded goods to portray their own lifestyle or values. Significant Sometimes (37.1%): A substantial segment only consumes brands in some situations or in certain circumstances. Small Minority (11.4%) say Yes: Only a few people regularly use brands to indicate their personal identity. In this case, utility and price probably play a bigger role

than brand identity, since almost 90 per cent do not consider brand as an important way of expressing themselves.

### 7.11: Branding and Construction of Self-Image



**Figure 7.11. Branding and construction of Self-Image**  
Source: Google form responses

This chart examines the consumer use of brands to establish their identity in relation to others. According to 35 people who were asked about it on a scale of 1 (lowest) to 4 (highest):

The highest percentage (37.1) rated a 3, which means that lots of consumers believe that brands are a good means of generating a particular "desired image."

The vocational agreement (ratings 3 and 4) is at 51.4%, and the little to no agreement (ratings 1 and 2) amounts to 48.6%. Only a huge 25.7% (rating 1) believe that they do not use a feel brand in any way to create their social image.

The figures indicate a polarised viewer. Although over half of those surveyed use branded products to manage impressions, just under half of them do not consider branding as a key component in the way their peers view them. This implies that the desired image for this group can be constructed based on factors other than material consumption.

### 7.12. Overall Interpretation

The general statistics indicate that the consumer behaviour pattern is balanced among the youth in Kolkata. Although branded products are desired and possess a symbolic quality, respondents do not rely on them fully to provide identity or confidence.

## 8. FINDINGS

1. Most of the respondents subscribe to branded products, meaning that they are highly brand-oriented.
2. The role of brands while purchasing is moderately high.
3. The consumer behaviour has a visible but not a dominant impact on social media.
4. Quality is the greatest consideration in buying products.
5. A major share of people consider brands to strengthen social identity.
6. Branded goods have an intermediate impact on self-confidence.
7. The young people are both affirmative and opposed to the consumer culture.

## 9. DISCUSSION

The results of this paper underscore the multidimensional and complicated correlation between branded consumption and the youth identity formation in Kolkata. The findings show that the preference for branded products is not absolute, but it functions together with functional, social and personal factors. This can be related to the concept of the extended self by Belk (1988), in which the possessions aid in identity building, although not entirely.

The mid-high value of brands implies that the youth value the brands as significant symbols of their lifestyles, status, and character traits. This gives credence to the theory of brand personality presented by Aaker (1997) that describes the way people perceive brands as human traits and employ them as self-expression. Nonetheless, the statistics also show that quality and price still play the prime role when it comes to buying a product, and it signifies that rationality remains an influential factor in consumer behaviour.

Although the effects of social media are apparent, they have been observed to have a moderate effect as opposed to a dominant one. This part confirms, according to Djafarova and Rushworth (2017), that influencers are influential in forming the consumption patterns of youth. Meanwhile, the findings indicate that young consumers are not passive consumers of digital content, as they, on the contrary, actively interpret and negotiate the meanings attached to the brands. This is an expression of a critical consciousness and personal agency of the consumer culture.

Another significant point is the split perception on the role of brands in identity and confidence formation. Although most of the respondents hold that branded products are better in terms of social image, there is a significant number who oppose the notion that brands define personality. This observation is close to the argument by Bauman (2007) about the consumer society that points to the fact that identity has been commodified, but at the same time, it is fluid and unstable. The mid-range mean score of confidence also shows that the brands are involved in self-presentation, but they are not the main cause of self-worth.

On the whole, it can be said that the youth identity formation is a negotiated process that is influenced by the symbolic consumption and personal values. Brands are significant tools of social and cultural values; their meaning is constantly being deciphered and restructured by consumers in particular situations.

## 10. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that branded consumption is highly important but has a confined influence in identifying youths in Kolkata. Though most of the people interviewed were in favour of branded products, their decisions are based on both functional and symbolic elements, as quality and price affect their decision and also their social attitude and status. This shows that there is rational and expressive consumption behaviour. The results indicate that social media helps to form brand tastes and desires, although its impact is moderate. The young people are not controlled by digital trends completely, but there are signs of

selectivity and criticality. This shows that identity development is not entirely based on the external factors, but rather it is an active interpretation and a choice.

Significantly, it has been noted in the study that brands can be used to boost confidence and social image, but they do not determine the identity of an individual. A large segment of the people interviewed is opposed to the fact that identity is created solely by the process of consumption. This indicates that young people have the spirit of uniqueness and independence, even though they are integrated into a consumerist culture.

To conclude, the identity formation in youth turns out to be both dynamic and complex and is defined by the consumer culture and personal values. The brands are the means of self-expression and social communication, which, however, are not the only determinants of identity. Aspirational consumption and critical resistance exist simultaneously, which is indicative of a moderated relationship with the contemporary consumer culture and is useful to the researcher, marketer, and policymaker.

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