

“I am what i consume”: Exploring the interplay between identity and consumption among middle-class urban youths in Dhaka South City, Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

In the late modern era, identity is closely intertwined with consumption, shifting it from sustenance to a vital marker of individuality and a platform for showcasing fashion opulence in the social space. This study is an attempt to understand the mechanisms through which youth consumers shape their identities. Deploying a mixed-method approach, we gathered quantitative data through interviews administered by a semi-structured survey questionnaire. Complementing this, qualitative insights were gathered through in-depth interviews (IDI). Adopting a purposive sampling method frame, we interviewed 150 individuals (89 male, 61 female) from Dhanmondi, Dhaka, between March and April 2022. The objective was to unveil people’s attitudes, social norms, and behavioral influences shaping their intentions towards identity formation through consumption. Findings highlight that individuals’ attitudes and behavioral control serve as key predictors for their intention to mold a desired identity through consumption. In-depth interviews show that social acceptance, identity expression, and feelings of fulfillment have significant effects on respondents' consumption practices, even though many oppose the idea that luxury consumption and mental well-being are positively associated. While shopping malls function as social and emotional spaces, people exhibit ambivalence, balancing desires for self-presentation and societal conformity with claims to independent selfhood. The study reveals that the late modern consumer society has ushered in changes conducive to conspicuous consumption. However, despite this trend, urban middle-class youths appear to align more with conventional consumer behaviour in many aspects. The pinnacle of conspicuous consumption has not yet been attained among this demographic, which suggests the evolving landscape in their consumption patterns.

Keywords: Consumption, Identity, Middle-Class Urban, Youth

INTRODUCTION

Consumption has become one of the central aspects of individuals' lives in late modern societies (Warde, 1994, 2017). Consumption behaviors may be considered as avenues for participation in and construction of local, communal, and individual identities. Individuals develop their identities in relation to things they consume. The rise of consumerism or consumption for status has been fostered by the influx of consumer culture brought about by globalization and expanding global interconnections. People engage in excessive consumption due to a fear of diverging from standards as well as a desire to stand out Boström (2020). While Western countries championed the changes in consumption behaviors, Bangladesh has just begun to witness such a transition in recent years. This study is an attempt to understand the mechanisms through which youth consumers shape their identities, particularly through conspicuous consumption.

In the late modern period, "consumption is not just a matter of satisfying material greed or filling the stomach. It is a question of manipulating symbols for all sorts of purposes" Bauman (1992). Individuals now mostly consume to fulfill their desires rather than to meet basic human necessities, as they have overcome the fear of sustenance. Veblen & Mills (1992) argued that individuals have mostly surpassed the fear of survival and now focus on fashion and display and the pursuit of opulence in modern societies. The individual sense of identity is no longer bound to imaginary or fictitious matters; rather, in the modern world, people regularly create and re-create their identities in any form. Identity is an implicit -if often unrecognized- destination as Giddens (1991) has stated, everyday purchasing decisions in today's society are increasing "decisions not merely about how to act but who to be". The sociological perspective on consumer habits as direct reflections of material conditions and class positions has largely lost the appeal that was dominant once. A more profound understanding of consumption as affected by a diverse array of human and societal influences has evolved in recent decades Warde (1997b). As such, consumed items emerged as a marker of identity. Vallianatos & Raine (2008) explored how food is related to identity within the South Asian immigrants in Canada.

In this regard, Can Emmez (2020) investigated the relationship between food and identity within the Ezidi community in Turkey. Wijetunga (2016), on the other hand, connected the use of mobile phones with identity across diverse consumer groups. Consumption, as highlighted by Warde (1994), is strategically positioned at the core of identity formation, with commodities acting as primary tools for communicating self-identity. Consequently, consumption transcends being a mere formless act of desire, as emphasized by Bourdieu (1984), and becomes a powerful means of expressing one's identity, social relationships, status, and values. Consumption can thus be viewed as a dynamic interplay involving production logic, goods circulation, and consumers' culturally shaped identities, social positions, desires, and judgments Lury (1996). Identity acquisition is linked to the purchase, possession, and consumption of material objects Dittmar (2011). Consequently, in late modern society, consumption has emerged as a central facet of individuals' lives (Warde, 1994, 2017).

Bangladesh's economy has already undergone significant liberalization; in particular, throughout the 1990s, the rate of liberalization was quite rapid. Bashar & Khan (2009) found that the adoption of trade liberalization policies had a beneficial impact on Bangladesh's economic growth. The Open Policy's profusion of goods and cultural items invariably brings with it the capitalist, consumerist attitude, like "you are what you consume" in urban Bangladesh. The growth of privatization and market ideology due to these open neo-liberal policies has resulted in expanding a consumerist attitude among people, predominantly in urban areas. Even a culture of consumption leads people to subjugate their conscience to capitalist society Kabir (2012). Consumerism is thus preceded by neo-liberalism Husain (2022). As Bauman (2009)

argued, youth today live in a global society of consumers, and this consumer culture affects all aspects of their lives. This pushes youth to consume more and more, which thus becomes a never-ending avenue for continuous hope (Islam (2022)).

Globalization and continuous international interactions have ushered in a consumer culture, giving rise to a phenomenon that scholars term "conspicuous consumption" or the act of consuming for status. It is commonly found in the literature that consumption is no longer a matter isolated from the formation of self and identity; rather, it is consumption that (re)defines identity. Warde (1997a) stated: "Today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others via the goods and practices that they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances, thereby creating and sustaining a 'self-identity'." The aspects of modernity and globalization are closely related to such formation of self and identity (Beck, 1992; R. W. Belk, 1988; Giddens, 1991). This consumer-centric narrative, which views consumption as entwined with self-identity is especially pertinent given Bangladesh's changing environment, reflecting globalization's and neoliberal policies' significant effects on society's beliefs and individual actions.

Bangladesh is undergoing rapid modernization and globalization, marked by significant improvements in social, cultural, and political aspects. The poverty rate dropped from 43.8% in 1991 to 14.8% in 2016, while indicators such as life expectancy, literacy, and per capita food production have seen notable increases. The continuous rise in GDP reflects sustained progress, positioning Bangladesh on a trajectory towards adopting Western development principles. So, the aspect of consumerism is widely notable in the contemporary society of Bangladesh. At this onset, the matter of consumption and related functions can be emerging areas for social research. Few studies contributed to the understanding of consumption in Bangladesh concerning globalization and neo-liberal economic policy (Husain, 2022; Khondker & Robertson, 2018; Rahman, 2016). Several studies (Haq, 2012; Higuchi & Inaba, 2012; Hossain, 2010) have explored consumer culture in Bangladesh. However, there is a lack of sufficient research investigating the connection between consumption and the formation of identity. In this connection, the study aims to contribute to the understanding of how consumption shapes identity formation among urban youths in Bangladesh. Further, the study also aims to explain the level of conspicuous consumption that has developed among urban middle-class youth. The study focuses on the youth as they are the primary consumer in modern societies Bauman (2009). Modernity, globalization, and cultural diffusion are all associated with consumption patterns. To comprehend changing consumer behavior and the forces that drive it, it is necessary to look at these influences from a wider context. In line with this, the study emphasizes people's intention to build a desirable identity regarding products or services they consume by employing the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB).

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section presents the theoretical foundation of consumption and identity to understand the concepts through a sociological lens. In the next section, we focus on the methodology of the study. Then, we analyze the theory of planned behavior in relation to consumption and identity formation. The paper concludes with a discussion and conclusion section where we summarize the study findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Consumption and Identity

Consumption understood as “...a process of market attachment and detachment involving the acquisition, appropriation, appreciation as well as the devaluation, divestment and disposal of goods, services and experiences” Evans (2022), is an important component in the formation of personal identity since choices people make about experiences and objects serve to both define and reflect their identities in social contexts. Dermody et al. (2018) argued that consumption and identity are intertwined in the process of building and improving self-identity.

Consumption of products and services then contributes to the formation of identity and thus social identity. In his study of *Fashion*, Simmel (1957) argued that fashion reflects the modern individual's yearning for personal expression and belonging to a group. The acquisition of material goods, such as clothing or consumer devices, as well as consumer experiences, such as vacations or concerts, has long been related to the formation of an extended sense of self R. W. Belk (1988). Individuals can readily communicate identity through the clothing they wear, the vehicles they drive, the perfumes they wear, the technological gadgets they use, the clubs and businesses they attend, and the places they reside R. Belk (2008). Cutright et al. (2013) argued that what consumers buy – products or services – allows them to *reflect* (communicate something about who they are – also reflect on being part of a group), *restore* (using consumption to bolster the self), and *create a new self* (identity goals, for the future or ideal self). According to Slater (2002), individuals' social connections in contemporary society revolve around the quest to define their identities, and consumption is the process used to identify who they are and subsequently construct their identity toward society. As a result, the act of consuming a particular product becomes a significant means of communicating one's 'self'. People make their identities visible and available to those they want to impress or are subservient to Munro (2004).

Consumption could be researched from a variety of disciplinary perspectives Warde (2022), Douglas & Isherwood (2002) provided cultural insights as they stated that people grow up in cultures and cultures evolve continuously, which shape their consumption patterns. Theories in the fields of economics, sociology, and psychology—which are always being debated—offer insight into the underlying causes of a wide range of behaviors. Theoretical underpinnings in Sociology are almost always based on the consumer's freedom of choice and personal behavior, occasionally inflected by looking at the impact of commercial persuasion strategies and social and group circumstances Warde (2017). It is often argued that conceptions of personhood centered on the idea that identity is created – and that identity is produced primarily through structures -as sociologists anticipated, such as class, ethnicity, and the division of labor. The study of identity was not at the center of sociologyⁱ or other disciplines' thoughts years ago; rather, it was an object of philosophical meditation Bauman (2004). At present, the analysis of consumption and identity, as Warde (2017) said, is primarily based on consumer behavior and personal choices.

Theoretical Framework

In line with the argument of Warde (2017) that identity these days primarily revolves around consumer behavior and personal choices, we choose to adopt a behavioral theory, the theory of planned behavior (TPB) by (Ajzen, 1985, 1991a), to better understand identity formation in relation to consumption. Figure 1 presents a modified framework following TPB concerning consumption and identity. The figure

was generated following Ajzen’s guidelines on preparing a questionnaire using TPB constructs Ajzen & Cote (2008).

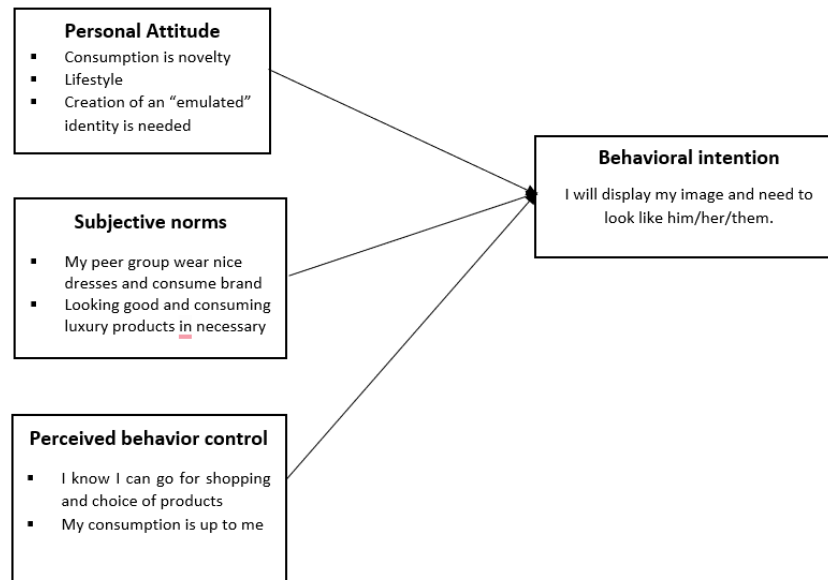


Figure 1: Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) [Adapted from (Ajzen, 1985, 1991a)]

The TPB was first proposed in 1980ⁱⁱ to predict a person's intention to engage in certain behavior at a specific time and location. It was created to characterize all activities that humans can influence. Three criteria, as the theory proposes, determine intention; these three criteria are the following: *Personal attitudes* (feelings towards any conduct or subjective consideration of any action), *Subjective norms* (how one evaluates other people’s perception of any conduct), and *Perceived behavioral control* (control over any given action). Ajzen (1991a) stated that “intentions are assumed to capture the motivational factors that influence behavior; they are indications of how hard people are willing to try, of how much of an effort they are planning to exert, to perform the behavior. Generally, the stronger the intention to engage in a behavior, the more likely it is to be performed”.

Middle Class

The middle class is taken up as an ideological category in the theoretical framework, breaking from rigid classifications based on material characteristics or wealth Luskey (2012). The middle class is considered an ideological category since it includes not just economic status but also cultural, social, and aspirational attributes. It is characterized by more than just money; it also contains cultural attitudes and symbolic value. Understanding the middle class as an ideological category is essential for this research as it enables an extensive examination of how the consumption habits of this group contribute to the creation and communication of identities that reflect the values and ambitions of society as a whole.

METHODOLOGY

The study aims to understand the mechanisms through which urban youth consumers shape their identities, particularly through conspicuous consumption. In doing so, the study tested four constructs of TPB. These constructs were customized based on previous studies on consumer behavior using TPB and we followed Ajzen & Cote (2008) guidelines. The study follows a mixed method approach, i.e., a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Mixed-method science is characterized as combining two different research methods – quantitative and qualitative data collection methods – and analyzing them as a single new approach Creswell (1999).

Despite debates surrounding the classification of mixed methods as an independent social research design Creswell et al. (2003), it is essential to understand the approach's significant relevance and effectiveness. The researcher can establish generalizability and quantify behavioral features by using a quantitative technique. Qualitative interviews, on the other hand, provide a valuable tool for the researcher to gain insight into respondents' consumption choices, behaviors, and the complex process of identity construction in connection to consumption. In light of practical considerations and the settings of the research, the combination of methods could be considered in a given circumstance Punch (2008). Mixed methods research recognizes that both quantitative and qualitative approaches have strengths and weaknesses Creswell et al. (2011). Researchers acquire a greater understanding of the research problem by combining both methods.

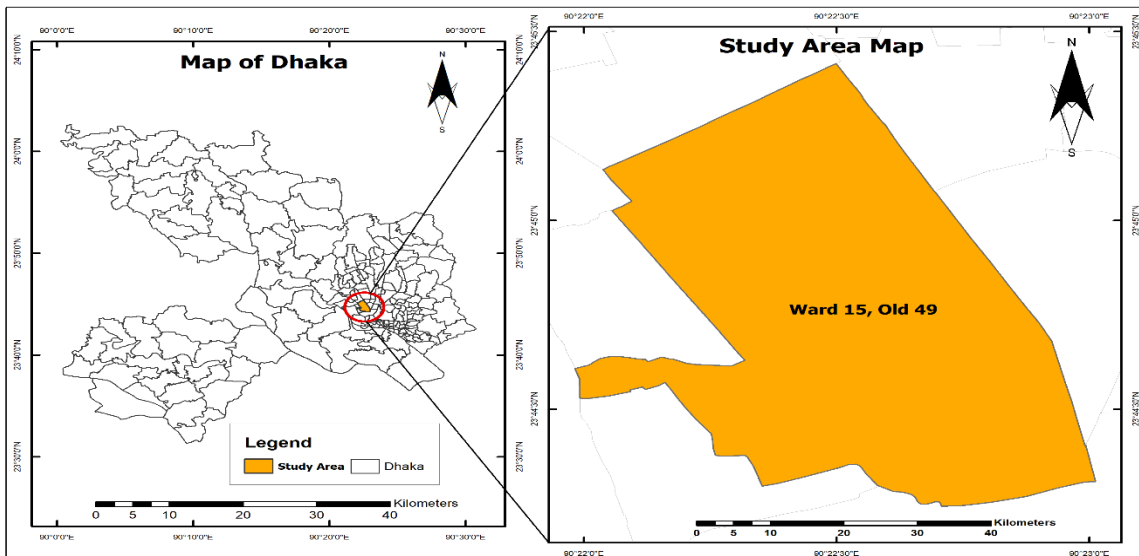


Figure 2: Study Area

The study collected data from ward no. 15 of Dhaka South City Corporation (See Figure 2). According to BBS (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (2022), the population of this area is 75,150 in 14,735 households. A survey questionnaire following the guidelines of Fishbein & Ajzen (2011) takes into account four constructs of TPB. The first three constructs contained two statements, while the last construct, intention, has only one statement. The questionnaire was tested by a pilot survey before moving to the

study areas and necessary modifications were added. The data collection took place between December 2021 to April 2022.

The study followed a purposive sampling method for data collection. Respondents were chosen purposively upon meeting predefined criteria. Specifically, respondents were chosen based on their belonging to the urban middle-class youth demographic. We adopted the middle class as an ideological category and did not adhere to any certain classification of the class by income or other material aspects Luskey (2012). The sample included 150 respondents mostly youth between the ages of 16 and 30. The sample consisted in terms of gender 89 men and 61 women. Regarding educational qualification, 77 respondents were undergraduates and 17 were either pursuing or finishing their master's; most of the respondents finished their higher secondary education. The majority of the respondents (n=132) were students fit for the focus of the study on youth consumers. This study replicated the sampling frame of Lata and Lata & Wohab (2010), who conducted a social survey in the same area. They used sampling techniques to measure statistically significant samples and found that 149 samples would be ideal representatives.ⁱⁱⁱ The study did, however, replicate its sample size while taking into account other methodological factors, such as how well the sample characteristics matched the objectives of the study.

Twenty in-depth interviews (male=11, female=9) were carried out with selected respondents from the pool of survey respondents to supplement the findings of the survey. The semi-structured nature of the interviews offered room to investigate personal experiences and perspectives on consumption, identity, and societal factors. Based on their survey responses, participants were selected to ensure representation across multiple demographic groups. Every interview took thirty to forty-five minutes and covered aspects including the psychological effects of consumption, the value of consumed products, and the role that social approval plays in purchasing choices. The interviews also looked at respondents' ideas of luxury and need as well as whether their purchase patterns matched their identities. The interviews provided personal experience regarding how societal influences and individual perceptions influence people's decisions, while the survey revealed general trends. Combining the two methods provided a more thorough and reliable inquiry.

For quantitative data analysis, Researchers used IBM SPSS 21. Atlas.ti version 9 was also used for qualitative data analysis. Before inputting into both software, the data were carefully checked and cleaned. The raw data must be managed to see whether there are any visible problems, such as the inability to answer properly Bryman & Cramer (2012), which researchers maintain carefully. At various phases of social research, ethical considerations and confidentiality arise Bryman (2008). Researchers sought to recognize the concerns of community members in the study settings by taking ethical concerns and values seriously.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This section highlights the empirical findings based on social surveys and IDIs. This section focuses on exploring the intention of identity formation in relation to what urban youths consume, especially luxury items, to display their possession. Firstly, we turn to describing the constructs of TPB.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	No. of items retained (No. of initial items)	Mean ^a	Standard deviation	Chronbach's Alpha
Attitude	2 (2)	4.69	1.13	0.219
Subjective Norms	2 (2)	4.93	1.19	0.374
Perceived Behavioural Control	2 (2)	4.96	1.31	0.523
Intention	1 (1)	4.86	1.34	-

^a. Individual items were measured on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree through 7 = strongly agree). Higher scores signify more positive attitudes, more favourable subjective norms, more perceived behavioural control and stronger intention.

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics for the theory of planned behavior constructs. The participants' average attitude score was 4.69, with a standard deviation of 1.13, the lowest of the three items. The mean score for the subjective norm was 4.93, with a standard deviation of 1.19. The mean score for perceived behavioral control was 4.96, with a standard deviation of 1.31. Finally, with a standard deviation of 1.34, the average score for the intention was 4.86.

Table 2: TPB constructs

<i>Item Statistics</i>					
Constructs	Statements	Mean (SD)	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
Attitude	My consumption is likely to be good.	4.71 (1.368)	13.3%	34.7%	52%
	People approve my consumption behaviour	4.67 (1.645)	17.4%	26%	56.6%
Subjective Norms	People like me consume such	4.77 (1.440)	18.7%	25.3%	56%
	It is necessary to look good and consume well.	5.10 (1.600)	19.4%	17.2%	63.4%
Perceived Behavioral Control	I can go shopping and decorate myself	5.37 (1.412)	12.7%	12.7%	74.6%
	I intend to display my image and present myself	4.55 (1.755)	28%	18.7%	53.3%
Intention	I have formulated my desired identity	4.86 (1.336)	10%	34%	56%

(N=150)

Table 2 contains descriptive statistics for individual items, such as the percentage of respondents who responded positively (either slightly agree, agree, or strongly agree), neutrally, or negatively (slightly disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree) to each statement.

Predictors of Intention

We conducted a multiple linear regression test where intention was placed as a dependent variable and attitude, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control were treated as independent variables or predictors.

Table 4. Predictors of intention

Predictor	B	(SE)	β	t	p
Constant	2.35***	(0.58)	–	4.03	<0.001
Attitude	0.22**	(0.10)	0.18	2.20	0.030
Subjective Norm	0.06	(0.10)	0.05	0.59	0.559
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.25**	(0.08)	0.24	2.94	0.004

Model fit: $R^2 = 0.124$, $Adj. R^2 = 0.106$, $F(3,146) = 6.92$, $p < 0.001$

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$. Dependent variable: Intention.

Firstly, we attempted to assess the influence of consumers’ attitudes toward consumption on their intention to build their desired identity. The regression analysis found that perceived attitude was a statistically significant predictor of intention (Table 4). Secondly, the regression analysis found that subjective norm was not a statistically significant predictor of intention. Thirdly, the regression analysis revealed that perceived behavioral control is a statistically significant predictor of intention. This means the way people control their shopping behavior and display their possessions is a predictor of their intention to build the desired identity.

To deepen the analysis, we extended the regression model by adding socio-demographic variables (Gender, Age, Education, and Occupation) alongside the TPB constructs. This allowed us to test whether psychosocial predictors remain significant once socio-economic controls are introduced. Our extended regression shows that attitude and perceived behavioral control remain statistically significant predictors of intention even after controlling for socio-demographics, confirming the robustness of the TPB constructs (Table 5).

Table 5. Extended predictors of intention

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2
Attitude	0.22** (0.10)	0.23** (0.10)
Subjective Norm	0.06 (0.10)	0.10 (0.10)
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.25** (0.08)	0.19** (0.09)
Gender (Female = 1)	–	0.81*** (0.21)
Age	–	0.03 (0.06)
Education (ref = Secondary)		

Intermediate/College	—	-0.16 (0.35)
Honours	—	-0.01 (0.40)
Masters	—	-0.20 (0.58)
Occupation (ref = Student/Other)		
Government Employee	—	0.61 (0.84)
Teacher	—	0.32 (1.28)
Engineer	—	1.67 [†] (0.91)
Corporate Employee	—	0.63 (0.44)
Constant	2.35 ^{***} (0.58)	0.61 (1.41)
Model fit: R²	0.124	0.243
Adj. R²	0.106	0.177
F (df₁, df₂)	6.92 (3, 146)	3.67 (12, 137)

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. [†] $p < .10$, ^{**} $p < .05$, ^{***} $p < .001$. Reference categories: Education = Secondary; Occupation = Student/Other. Dependent variable: Intention.

Gender emerges as a strong and highly significant predictor, which suggests that female respondents are more likely to report higher intentions of identity formation through consumption. Subjective norms remain non-significant. Education and most occupation categories do not significantly predict intention, though engineers show a marginally higher likelihood. The explanatory power of the model improves modestly once socio-demographic variables are included, suggesting that while psychosocial factors remain central, gender differences also play an important role.

Meanings of Consumption and the Making of the Self

In-depth interviews with the respondents reveal that their shopping behavior largely depends on the values of any object they consume and the social approval of such consumption. Similar to what Goss (1993), the findings reveal that the shopping mall has become an alternative focus to modern life; these centers have become part of people's lives. People tend to visit shopping malls more frequently than they need to. Some even go to shopping centers for 'mental wellbeing' (IDI- 5, 8). Some respondents reported that they avoid purchasing luxury items that are not of actual necessity (IDI-8). Largely, the perception of what can be termed 'luxury' differs from person to person. Some people noted that anything that is part of regular life and most extravagant or decorative is luxury. Some respondents mentioned that luxury items sometimes become our necessity to look good or fit into any situation (IDI-11). Yet, 62.7% of respondents from the social survey responded negatively while being asked whether they assume products as a part of social status. In addition, 69% of respondents do not display what they consume. The statistical finding that behavioral control predicts identity formation is echoed in interviews where youths describe selective restraint in luxury purchases as an act of self-management.

Respondents mentioned a tendency to display and compare with others, while I asked them *to what extent they display goods they buy and compare them with others*. One of the respondents stated that it has become a normal phenomenon to display our possessions, as she said: "It is normal nowadays

to display whatever we buy, like dresses, ornaments, or other products. Maybe some people buy only to display or show off. Also, you see a lot of people purchase products just because others did it too, whether they like it or not. This is what is liable for such a rise in consumption.” (IDI-3). Another respondent focused on the other’s approval: “I won’t say I display everything that I purchase, but yes, I do display or like to display some items I buy. I think it’s very person-to-person, but most of us become happy when someone says that your outfit is nice or you look good today.” (IDI-12). Another respondent mentioned the social influence behind the purchase of any product: “Sometimes we even buy something just because others also bought it. I think people always have the urge to compare their possessions with others. Like a dress. A lot of people buy dresses because of being influenced by the fact that someone already wears that and he/she looked good in that.” (IDI-16).

We asked the respondents to reflect on whether their consumption (mostly luxury items) pattern defines who they are or not. Responses were mixed and skewed to the negative. Some of the respondents prefer to open up about how certain products or services are closely linked to their ‘self’ or identity, while choosing not to closely reflect on that. One of the respondents mentioned the significance of the products he purchased: “Using and buying products reflects my taste and my way of living life. In this sense, it is a part of my identity. My identity consists of what I choose for myself, what I value, and what I consider as a part of mine.” (IDI-6). Another respondent sees products as part of her personality: “[To me] my outfit, shoes, wristwatch and mobile phone help to grow my personality. In this sense, they are part of me.” (IDI-16). One of the respondents opposed that consumption always defines oneself; rather, it is partially correct: “This is partially correct, not completely. Some of my identities, like my economic status and the society’s perception of me, depend partially on my consumption. But identities like my family background, birthplace, education, etc. don’t depend on this” (IDI-17). Another respondent said he feels different while using some products: “I sometimes feel superior in music when I wear a t-shirt which is from a brand or has a Real Madrid logo.” (IDI-9).

Bauman (2013) argued that money or the capacity to spend becomes the core means of happiness and stability in modern consumer culture. We asked the respondents whether products or commodities function as a stimulator of mental well-being for them or not. However, most of the respondents do not see products as a stimulus for mental well-being. As one of the respondents said: “I don’t believe this. Your personality or soul is independent. It’s not dependent on products.” (IDI-1). In line with this, another respondent mentioned: “Products are not related to happiness or good feeling. I said that my soul is independent.” (IDI-3).

We asked the respondents whether they feel pressure to decorate themselves and display their self-image. Responses were mainly negative in this sense; respondents mentioned that they usually feel the urge to buy many luxury items, but not to the extent that it will cost them a lot or empty their pockets (IDI-11, 13, 7). We also asked whether respondents feel the urge to buy ‘matching’ items or if one item drives them to buy another. One of the respondents mentioned: “Yes, this happens; like I went to buy a Saree, but I ended up buying a matching ornament, shoes, and a bag (laughs). Besides, this is always pressure to buy items that match the dress or others. We always seek to buy things that match with others, right?” (IDI-11). In this way, matching items always matters for consumers to make choices regarding their consumption in the case of mostly luxury and self-decorating products.

By applying the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1985, 1991b), the study aims to understand the mechanisms through which young consumers shape their identities, particularly through conspicuous consumption. TPB has been used to understand consumer behavior in many previous studies (Ajzen, 2015; Huchting et al., 2008; Kuther, 2002; Paul et al., 2016; Rah et al., 2004). Most of these studies focused on predicting a particular behavioral pattern by taking into consideration attitude, subjective norms, and perceived control affecting intention. This study rather emphasizes people's intention to build a desirable identity regarding the products or services they consume. While TPB conceptualizes intention as a rational predictor of behavior, in consumer contexts, intention also embodies symbolic motivations, which means how individuals plan to project identity through material choices. This bridges Ajzen's behavioral focus with Bourdieu's emphasis on taste and social distinction.

Consumption and identity have been studied from several disciplines, with each having a different perspective on this; like Anthropology (Douglas & Isherwood, 2002; Wilska, 2002), Marketing (R. W. Belk, 1988; Sirgy, 1982), Sociology (Munro, 2004, 2015; Warde, 1997b, 2017) and Psychology. What is common in all these streams of analysis is that all these disciplines acknowledge the fact that consumption concerning identity formation has emerged as an area of study in the modern period due to the rise of mass production and distribution that facilitated mass consumption. Consumption is not a mundane activity, nor do people consume to satisfy their necessities. Rather, consumption has a symbolic meaning that expresses a sense of signaling of formation of identities. The paper argues that the choices individual makes while consuming any good or product reflect themselves consciously or unconsciously, which is in line with the arguments of major theorists from these disciplines.

Individual choices, then, depend on production and availability. Mass consumption came into being as a result of mass production and distribution in the 20th century. Change in fashion came after the Renaissance when people started choosing fashionable products instead of durable products, as a means of communicating individuals' value to society as a marker of their social status Dantas & Abreu (2020). Consumption in the present era is attributed to unpredictable, individualistic, expressive, and highly competent activities. Middle-class youth's intent on displaying their wealth through purchasing luxury goods – including fashion – which they can use as a representation of their social status. Simmel (1949) argued that “material property is, to speak, an extension of the ego, and any interference with our property is, for this reason, felt to be a violation of the person”. Marcuse (2013) argues that, rather than shaping themselves intentionally, humans in modern industrial societies allow themselves to be formed by the "things" in their culture. Individuals recognize themselves in brands they buy as they search for their ideal self-image in automobiles, cell phones, designer clothing, and works of art.

A test of the seven-item bipolar scale by (Ajzen, 1985, 1991b) suggests that people consume when they consider it to be good for themselves and receive approval of their consumption from others. A large number of respondents think it's a necessity to consume certain items due to the social pressure they feel. Certain commodities serve to establish a surface identity, as well as a technique of self-presentation in the sense that they transmit symbolic meaning to others Dempsey (1999). The findings are consistent with the findings of the application of TPB on consumer behavior Hasan et al. (2019); people's attitudes and behavioral control were found to be the predictors of their intention to build the desired identity in relation to consumption.

In terms of *attitude*, people tend to perceive their consumption to be good, along with others' approval of their consumption. The second element is a significant factor in shaping consumer behavior (Neave et al., 2020; Watson, 2012). Watson (2012) explored the people's attempt to seek social approval

of their consumption, drawing from the works of Adam Smith and Veblen’s infamous *The Theory of Leisure Class* (1899). In this case, the implication of the action's visibility in conferring projected acceptability appears to exceed the message the action may convey about the individual as Watson implied. Furthermore, individuals act on increasingly shared societal dispositions to seek self-assurance through showcasing a display of affluence. In terms of *subjective norms*, conceptions like “people like me consume such” and feelings of necessity to look good were not statistically significant when tested for their influence on the formation of the desired identity. This, however, contradicts one of our primary assumptions that was derived from theories (Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 2007) argues that people tend to present themselves in numerous ways, taking into account different social contexts (to fit into the situation). In this line, Bourdieu argues that consumption allows people to act out their tastes by displaying their cultural capital Bourdieu (1984).

The third construct of TPB *perceived behavioral control*, included two items: the decision to go shopping and the intent to display self-image. These items, as the paper argues, were predictors of the intention of building the desired identity. The concept of shopping for identity formation is widely explored in some studies (Jackson, 1993; Jubas, 2011). A study by Jubas (2011) explored how people reaffirm their sense of social identities (ethnicity, gender, race, and class) in relation to their shopping behavior. Extending the model revealed that gender is also a powerful determinant, which suggests that female youths report stronger intentions of identity formation through consumption practices Ciornea (2021). This pattern aligns with feminist readings of consumption as a form of identity work, where women are culturally encouraged to manage self-presentation through appearance (Gill, 2007; Skeggs, 2004).

The qualitative insights from in-depth interviews enrich these patterns by revealing the symbolic, emotional, and social dimensions of consumer behavior. Respondents described shopping malls as sites of social life, consumption as a partial marker of self-expression, and luxury items as both a source of social approval and a site of restraint. While some youths associated consumption with identity and personality, others resisted the notion that material goods define the self, emphasizing intrinsic values instead.

CONCLUSION

Based on the empirical findings, the paper argues that the majority of urban youths do not consider consumption to be part of their identity, though some people, to a minimal extent, internalize the fact that they build identities consistent with what they consume. Among middle-class youths, they are found to be calculative and rational during making a purchase or decision regarding consumption. Consumer researchers largely identified factors like material possessions and brands in creating self, which was largely absent in my study, indicating that the instance of Western brand cult is still not so much prevalent here. Based on the discussion above and analysis of the findings, it can be that Dhaka’s urban middle-class youths are rather ordinary consumers, not quite modern or emulated consumers who have not yet developed the conspicuous consumption that we found in many modern theories. This is due to their not associating themselves with the luxury products and items they purchase and their tendency to use any products and services to satisfy their needs. The findings are consistent with the study of Wilska (2002), who conducted a study on consumption and identity in Finland.

Taken together, the findings indicate that youth identity in contemporary urban Bangladesh is shaped primarily by individual attitudes, self-control in consumption, and gender differences, rather than collective social approval. While consumption offers a means of expressing individuality and belonging, its role as a foundation of identity is contested; which means, for some, it symbolizes taste and personality, while for others, it remains secondary to intrinsic values such as family background or education. Overall, the study shows that consumption is not merely about material acquisition but is entangled with negotiations of self-image, social recognition, and personal values, highlighting both the possibilities and the limits of consumer culture as a basis for identity formation.

By linking TPB to questions of identity, the study offers fresh insights into how consumer behavior intersects with self-construction in the non-Western context. While attitudes and behavioral control are shown to be key predictors, the analysis also points to the modest but growing influence of gender and social settings. More broadly, the research contributes to the sociology of consumption by situating identity formation within late modern consumer practices.

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Appendix

Descriptive Statistics of Study Variables (N = 150)

Variable	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Attitude	4.69	1.13	1	7	-0.60	3.31
Subjective Norm	4.93	1.19	1.5	7	-0.28	2.60
Perceived Behavioral Control	4.96	1.31	2	7	-0.47	2.26
Intention (Identity)	4.86	1.34	1	7	-0.45	3.26
Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female)	1.41	0.49	1	2	0.38	1.14
Age (years)	21.63	3.05	16	30	0.21	2.53
Educational Qualification	3.61	0.85	2	5	-0.42	2.57
Occupation	1.47	1.40	1	6	2.80	9.07

Correlation Matrix of Key Variables (Pearson's r, N = 150)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Attitude	1							
2. Subj. Norm	0.362**	1						
3. PBC	0.187*	0.313**	1					
4. Intention	0.246**	0.192*	0.290**	1				
5. Gender	0.015	-0.068	0.138	0.291**	1			
6. Age	-0.197*	-0.192*	-0.026	0.040	-0.171*	1		
7. Education	-0.183*	-0.214**	-0.097	-0.007	-0.087	0.732*	1	
8. Occupation	-0.062	0.017	0.092	0.143	-0.086	0.380*	0.268*	1

p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01

Regression Model: Predictors of Intention (Extended Model)

Predictor	B	SE	β (Std.)	t	Sig.
Attitude	0.227	0.096	0.227	2.37	0.019 **
Subjective Norm	0.098	0.097	0.098	1.01	0.313
Perceived Behavioral Control	0.192	0.085	0.192	2.26	0.025 **
Gender (Female = 1)	0.807	0.214	0.807	3.77	0.000 ***
Age	0.027	0.059	0.027	0.46	0.644
Edu: Intermediate/College	-0.164	0.354	-0.164	-0.46	0.644
Edu: Honours	-0.006	0.401	-0.006	-0.02	0.988

Edu: Masters	-0.197	0.578	-0.197	-0.34	0.734
Occu: Govt. Employee	0.608	0.837	0.608	0.73	0.469
Occu: Teacher	0.318	1.284	0.318	0.25	0.805
Occu: Engineer	1.666	0.913	1.666	1.83	0.070 †
Occu: Corporate Employee	0.627	0.442	0.627	1.42	0.158
Model fit: $R^2 = 0.244$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.177$, $F(12,137) = 3.67$, $p < 0.001$					

† $p < 0.10$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$

Dependent Variable: Intention

Multicollinearity Diagnostics (VIF)

Variable	VIF	1/VIF
Age	3.27	0.305
Edu: Honours	4.10	0.244
Edu: Masters	3.43	0.292
Edu: Intermediate/College	2.38	0.421
Occupation dummies	1.11–1.47	0.68–0.90
Attitude	1.20	0.835
Subjective Norm	1.35	0.742
PBC	1.26	0.796
Gender	1.13	0.885
Mean VIF	1.93	