

Social Media Marketing And Brand Equity: Evidence From Masstige Fashion Brands Among Women Consumers In Urban Assam

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Abstract:

The rise of masstige fashion brands, blending mass accessibility with prestige, is reshaping consumer aspiration and brand strategy across India's digital landscape. In this context, social media marketing (SMM) has become a powerful force in building brand equity, especially among women in culturally distinct and rapidly modernizing regions such as Assam. Yet, the specific ways in which SMM practices shape consumer-based brand equity (CBBE) for masstige fashion brands in these underexplored markets remain poorly understood. This study addresses that gap through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 women consumers in urban Assam, focusing on how key SMM activities content richness, visual storytelling, influencer engagement, and interactivity influence the four core dimensions of CBBE: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty.

Using thematic analysis and grounded in established branding and digital marketing frameworks, the research uncovers how culturally relevant and interactive SMM strategies drive trust, community, and loyalty among women consumers. The findings highlight that visual storytelling and influencer engagement, when tailored to local values and aspirations, have a particularly strong impact on perceived quality and ongoing brand attachment. By revealing the nuanced mechanisms through which SMM builds brand value for women in Assam, this paper extends digital branding literature and offers practical guidance for managers looking to localize their equity-building strategies in emerging regional markets.

Keywords: social media marketing, brand equity, masstige fashion, women consumers, Assam, digital branding, influencer marketing

JEL Classification: M31; L67; D12; Z13; O35

INTRODUCTION

Fashion branding in India is undergoing a profound shift. Where exclusivity once defined aspiration, today's middle class especially its younger women is driving demand for brands that deliver both status and accessibility (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Paul, 2019). This is where masstige fashion comes in, straddling the line between mass-market affordability and the allure of prestige. Brands like Zara, H&M, Allen Solly, and W for Women are not just selling clothing; they are selling a promise of style, self-expression, and upward mobility at a price point that feels within reach (Kapferer & Bastien, 2012; Kumar et al., 2020).

However, simply being present on social media is no longer enough for brands seeking to carve out a lasting place in the minds of their audience. The core challenge now is understanding what actually works in building true brand equity in a digital-first, culturally nuanced market like Assam (Kim & Ko, 2012; Keller, 1993; Baruah, 2022). For many urban women in this region, platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have become the main channels for fashion discovery, brand interaction, and even purchase decisions. Influencer endorsements, visual storytelling, interactive polls, and user-generated content shape brand perceptions and loyalty in ways traditional advertising never could (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Godey et al., 2016). As social media becomes ever more saturated and consumers more discerning, masstige brands face the challenge of moving beyond superficial engagement to actually building trust, value, and meaningful relationships with their audience (Ebrahim, 2020).

Despite the dramatic rise of digital marketing and the growing footprint of masstige fashion labels across India, most academic research remains focused on metropolitan hubs or treats the country as a homogeneous market (Gupta & Duggal, 2020; Sheth, 2021). Assam, with its blend of rapid modernization, deep-rooted cultural values,

and increasing digital adoption, is rarely the focus of marketing scholarship (Das & Dutta, 2023). Few studies examine how women in this region perceive and respond to social media marketing by masstige brands, or how these online strategies actually build the foundations of consumer-based brand equity awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty (Keller, 2001; Phukan, 2021). This lack of localized insight leaves marketers with little guidance on how to adapt their digital strategies to fit the unique motivations, aspirations, and constraints of Assamese women consumers.

This study aims to address that gap. The core objective is to assess how social media marketing activities including content richness, visual appeal, influencer engagement, and interactivity influence each dimension of brand equity for masstige fashion brands among women consumers in Assam. By focusing on a region and demographic that is often overlooked but rapidly evolving, the research aims to provide evidence that moves beyond metro-centric assumptions and generic digital marketing tactics.

The paper unfolds as follows. It begins with a review of existing literature on masstige branding, digital marketing, and brand equity, highlighting what is known and where gaps remain. It then presents the conceptual model and hypotheses underpinning the analysis. The methodology section details the sampling, data collection process, and analytic tools. Findings are presented and discussed, with attention to both their theoretical and practical implications. The conclusion offers actionable insights for brand managers, reflections on the study's limitations, and suggestions for future research directions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MASSTIGE BRANDING AND SOCIAL MEDIA MARKETING: DEFINITIONS AND EVOLUTION

The evolution of fashion branding in the 21st century has given rise to the concept of masstige products that bridge the gap between mass-market affordability and luxury's symbolic appeal (Silverstein & Fiske, 2003; Kapferer & Bastien, 2012). Masstige brands rely on delivering aspirational value, design excellence, and selective distribution, making high-style accessible to a broader middle-class audience (Paul, 2019). In India, brands such as Zara, H&M, Allen Solly, and W for Women embody this strategy, democratizing prestige while tapping into the aspirations of an expanding, digitally engaged consumer base (Kumar et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, the explosion of digital platforms has transformed how these brands interact with consumers. Social media marketing (SMM) has shifted branding from a top-down, transactional approach to a relational and participatory one (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Kim & Ko, 2012). Through platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, brands can create direct, ongoing dialogues with consumers, employing influencer partnerships, user-generated content, and interactive campaigns to deepen engagement and foster brand communities (Godey et al., 2016; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

BRAND EQUITY MODELS: AAKER, KELLER, AND THEIR RELEVANCE

Brand equity, broadly defined as the value a brand adds to a product, remains central to understanding consumer decision-making. Aaker (1991) conceptualizes brand equity through four main dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and brand loyalty. Keller (1993, 2001) refines this with the customer-based brand equity (CBBE) model, emphasizing how brand knowledge and experience influence responses to marketing. These frameworks highlight that strong brand equity translates into higher consumer trust, preference, and long-term loyalty.

In the context of fashion, brand equity not only impacts immediate purchase decisions but also underpins symbolic consumption, identity formation, and peer signalling (O'Cass, 2004; Batra et al., 2012). For masstige brands, which cannot rely solely on exclusivity, building robust equity is vital for justifying premium positioning while remaining accessible.

SMM AND BRAND EQUITY LINK: EVIDENCE FROM GLOBAL, INDIAN, AND NORTHEAST CONTEXTS

The impact of SMM on brand equity has been widely documented globally. Kim and Ko (2012) found that SMM activities including entertainment, interactivity, trendiness, customization, and word-of-mouth directly enhance customer equity for fashion brands. Godey et al. (2016) observed that SMM increases brand awareness, perceived

quality, and loyalty, especially in the luxury and masstige segments. Globally, influencer credibility and visual storytelling are found to be strong predictors of perceived quality and brand loyalty (Luarn et al., 2015; Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017).

In the Indian context, Singh and Dagur (2022) confirmed that SMM significantly influences brand equity and purchase intention among young women, with brand equity acting as a key mediator. Dewi et al. (2022) highlighted the intermediary role of brand awareness in the SMM-purchase intention relationship for fashion brands. However, most studies focus on metropolitan centers and university students, leaving the experiences of regional consumers and non-metro markets largely unaddressed (Gupta & Duggal, 2020).

Assam, despite rapid digitization and increasing female workforce participation, remains under-researched in the context of SMM and brand equity (Baruah, 2022; Das & Dutta, 2023). Existing work tends to overlook the unique cultural dynamics, hybrid consumer identities, and localized aspirations of women in the Northeast, creating a significant gap in the literature.

THEORETICAL LENS: BRANDING THEORY, S-O-R, AND RELATED FRAMEWORKS

This study draws on several interrelated theoretical frameworks. Branding theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) provides the foundation for analyzing how brands establish value and meaning in consumers' minds. The Stimulus–Organism–Response (S-O-R) model (Mehrabian & Russell, 1974) frames SMM activities as external stimuli, which influence internal evaluative states (brand attitudes, emotional connection), ultimately shaping consumer responses (purchase intentions, loyalty). Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) explains how consumers seek out and engage with social media content to fulfill psychological needs such as entertainment, self-expression, and social affirmation (Kim & Ko, 2012).

Conspicuous consumption theory (Veblen, 1899) is also relevant, as many women in emerging markets use masstige brands to signal status and navigate a hybrid of traditional and modern identities (Kates, 2004; O'Cass, 2004). Together, these frameworks guide the investigation of how SMM shapes CBBE for masstige brands in a culturally distinct region.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopted a qualitative approach to understand how social media marketing shapes consumer-based brand equity for masstige fashion brands among women in Kamrup (Metro), Assam. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 25 women aged 18 to 35 who actively engage with fashion brands on social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook. Participants were recruited purposively to reflect diverse backgrounds in education, occupation, and income, ensuring a range of perspectives within the target demographic. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and explored participants' experiences, attitudes, and narratives around brand trust, influencer engagement, peer dynamics, and the cultural meanings attached to masstige fashion consumption online.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis. Coding was performed with NVivo 14, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) methodology to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty. Rigor was ensured through member checks, researcher triangulation, and the maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical approval was secured from Assam Don Bosco University's research ethics committee, and all participants provided informed consent with assurances of confidentiality and voluntary participation.

FINDINGS

Thematic analysis of the in-depth interviews, supported by NVivo 14, revealed four principal themes illustrating how social media marketing (SMM) shapes the consumer-based brand equity of masstige fashion brands among women in Kamrup (Metro), Assam. These themes information sharing and engagement, visual content and perceived quality, trust and cultural resonance, and loyalty-building offer insight into both the psychological and social mechanisms underpinning brand relationships in a digital context.

Table1: NVivo output

| Theme | Sub-Theme | Node Frequency | Illustrative Participant Quote |
|---|-------------------------|----------------|---|
| Information Sharing & Engagement | Peer Sharing | 18 | "I usually share interesting brand posts in my WhatsApp group my friends often buy from those links." |
| | Interactive Feedback | 14 | "It's easy to give feedback in the comments or just react with an emoji. I feel like my opinion is visible to the brand." |
| Visual Content & Perceived Quality | Professional Imagery | 16 | "If the photos look professionally shot, and the details are clear, I trust the brand's quality more." |
| | Authenticity in Content | 12 | "I like brands that post real customer photos, not just models then I know what the clothes look like in real life." |
| Trust & Cultural Resonance | Local Identity | 15 | "When the brand uses Assamese designs and models from the Northeast, I feel it's meant for us." |
| | Cultural Representation | 13 | "I trust brands that don't just sell but also talk about things happening here, like Bihu or women's safety." |
| Loyalty-Building & Advocacy | Customer Recognition | 17 | "If a brand features real customers or responds to my queries quickly, I keep buying and recommend them to my friends." |
| | Social Responsibility | 11 | "If I see a brand supporting women's empowerment here, I feel proud to support them and tell others." |

INFORMATION SHARING AND ENGAGEMENT

A consistent finding across interviews was the centrality of social media as the primary interface for brand interaction and peer recommendation. Participants described an environment where brand-related information flows rapidly through networks of friends, family, and online communities, largely via platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Women frequently discussed sharing brand posts, forwarding promotional content, and tagging friends as natural extensions of their everyday social media activity. This high level of engagement fostered a sense of collective participation and influence. As one respondent noted, "I usually share interesting brand posts in my WhatsApp group my friends often buy from those links." Interactive features such as polls, direct messaging, and comment sections not only encouraged feedback but also allowed consumers to feel directly acknowledged by brands, enhancing the perceived openness and accessibility of the brand-consumer relationship.

VISUAL CONTENT AND PERCEIVED QUALITY

The visual presentation of a brand's social media presence was repeatedly linked to perceptions of product quality and professionalism. Participants expressed a strong preference for well-curated feeds, high-resolution imagery, and consistent visual aesthetics, emphasizing that such cues signalled both reliability and a sense of contemporary relevance. "If the photos look professionally shot, and the details are clear, I trust the brand's quality more," explained one interviewee. The expectation for regularly updated and detailed content was widespread; lapses such as outdated posts or poorly executed visuals were quickly interpreted as indicative of lower quality or diminished credibility. Many respondents also valued authenticity, mentioning that brands featuring real customers or behind-the-scenes stories fostered greater confidence and perceived transparency.

TRUST, BRAND ASSOCIATION, AND CULTURAL RESONANCE

Trust and positive brand associations were closely tied to cultural alignment and representation. Women consistently articulated a preference for brands that reflected Assamese culture, showcased regional influencers, or incorporated local motifs in their marketing narratives. The use of Assamese language, references to local festivals, and inclusion of Northeast models were perceived as markers of authenticity and respect for local identity. As one participant observed, “When the brand uses Assamese designs and models from the Northeast, I feel it’s meant for us.” Such efforts strengthened emotional attachment and fostered a sense of community, distinguishing these brands from generic, pan-Indian competitors. Trust was also reinforced through perceived transparency, frequent two-way communication, and the relatable personalities of influencers engaged by the brands.

LOYALTY-BUILDING AND ADVOCACY

Brand loyalty emerged as a product of both ongoing engagement and the brand’s broader alignment with local values. Respondents described loyalty as rooted in frequent and meaningful interactions, such as prompt responses to inquiries, acknowledgment of customer feedback, and inclusion of user-generated content. Women particularly valued brands that demonstrated social responsibility whether by supporting women’s causes, promoting sustainability, or addressing issues relevant to Assamese society. “If I see a brand supporting women’s empowerment here, I feel proud to support them and tell others,” Stated one participant. This sense of loyalty was manifested not only in repeat purchases but also in active advocacy, as women willingly recommended favoured brands to peers and posted positive testimonials on their own social channels.

ANALYTICAL RIGOR

Throughout the analysis, NVivo was used to systematically code and cluster data into pre-identified and emergent themes. Coding saturation was achieved well before the final interviews, underscoring the reliability of the identified patterns. Matrix queries revealed that conversations about engagement and sharing overlapped frequently with those about trust and advocacy, illustrating the interconnectedness of these domains. Word frequency visualizations highlighted “Instagram,” “quality,” “trust,” and “Assamese” as dominant constructs within participant narratives.

In sum, the findings reveal that the SMM practices most valued by women consumers dynamic information sharing, polished visual storytelling, cultural authenticity, and genuine engagement are fundamental to the development of brand equity in the Assamese masstige fashion market. These insights underscore the importance of culturally nuanced, interactive, and consumer-centric approaches in digital branding strategies.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illuminate how social media marketing (SMM) strategies, when culturally attuned and authentically executed, have a powerful impact on the brand equity of masstige fashion brands among women in Assam. By moving beyond superficial engagement metrics and exploring the lived experiences of women consumers, this research provides new evidence on how SMM activities shape awareness, perceived quality, trust, and loyalty in a rapidly digitizing regional market.

First, the prominence of peer sharing and interactive engagement highlights the collective nature of brand building in the digital age. Social media is not simply a channel for brand-to-consumer communication but a dynamic arena where consumers themselves become active co-creators of brand value. The ease with which women in Assam share, discuss, and recommend brands in their online networks suggests that SMM efforts which encourage authentic user participation such as shareable content, interactive stories, and two-way feedback have an outsized influence on brand awareness and advocacy. This extends recent findings in the branding literature (Godey et al., 2016; Kim & Ko, 2012), demonstrating that network effects and peer-driven content are especially potent in tight-knit, rapidly modernizing communities.

Second, the results reinforce the centrality of visual content as a proxy for perceived quality. In line with Keller’s (1993) conceptualization of brand equity and emerging digital marketing theory, participants made explicit connections between a brand’s visual storytelling on social platforms and their willingness to trust and purchase. This echoes international findings (Djafarova & Rushworth, 2017; Godey et al., 2016) and suggests that, in the

Assamese context, polished imagery and authentic representation matter as much if not more than traditional signals of prestige.

Third, the role of cultural resonance and local identity emerged as a unique and decisive factor for trust and brand association. Brands that reflect Assamese motifs, feature Northeast influencers, or address regionally relevant issues were rewarded with deeper emotional connections and a heightened sense of belonging among consumers. This insight pushes the literature forward, arguing that “glocalization” is not just a trend but a requirement for digital brand strategy in India’s diverse markets (Sheth, 2021; Das & Dutta, 2023). For national and international brands aiming to build loyalty in the Northeast, surface-level localization is insufficient; genuine cultural integration is what resonates.

Finally, the data show that loyalty and advocacy are closely tied to ongoing, meaningful engagement and brand social responsibility. Women expressed a willingness to advocate for brands that were responsive, valued their feedback, and demonstrated alignment with local causes or values. This finding supports and extends previous research on the links between SMM, trust, and brand loyalty (Ebrahim, 2020), but adds nuance by showing how social and cultural alignment intensifies this relationship.

Overall, these results not only validate core theoretical models of consumer-based brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993) in a new regional context but also reveal the added layers of cultural meaning, digital literacy, and peer influence that shape how brands must operate in Northeast India’s fashion market. The study demonstrates that SMM, when authentically and locally executed, can be a decisive driver of brand value among women consumers offering both theoretical advancement and clear guidance for practice.

IMPLICATIONS

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The insights from this study offer actionable guidance for brand managers and marketers seeking to establish or grow masstige fashion brands in Assam and similar regional markets. First, the evidence is clear: brands that invest in culturally relevant, visually appealing, and interactive social media content gain not only higher visibility but also increased consumer trust and loyalty. It is no longer sufficient to simply translate metropolitan campaigns to regional audiences. Instead, successful brands in Assam build their content strategy around local identities, community narratives, and issues that matter to women consumers be it regional festivals, Assamese motifs, or women’s empowerment.

Second, brand teams should prioritize regular, two-way digital engagement. Promptly responding to comments and direct messages, featuring real customers, and creating opportunities for consumers to co-create content all translate directly to greater brand advocacy. In practice, this means shifting social media budgets toward interactive features, influencer collaborations with regional personalities, and ongoing monitoring of cultural trends in the Northeast. Brands that are seen as authentic, supportive of local causes, and genuinely attentive to feedback will see increased word-of-mouth and brand loyalty.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Academically, this research extends established frameworks of consumer-based brand equity by demonstrating the importance of cultural resonance and digital engagement in shaping brand value in non-metro, rapidly digitizing markets. While past studies have established the power of SMM in luxury and masstige segments globally, few have shown how regional identity and local peer networks amplify or reshape these effects. The findings confirm that core CBBE dimensions awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and loyalty retain their relevance in Assam but are activated and deepened by local cultural cues and interactive practices. This study encourages future researchers to further explore the intersection of culture, gender, and digital influence, using both qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to capture the evolving dynamics of brand-consumer relationships in India’s emerging regions.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study provides valuable insights into how social media marketing influences brand equity among women consumers of masstige fashion brands in Assam, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the

qualitative nature and regional focus of the research limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or broader demographic groups. The perspectives captured are those of urban women in Kamrup (Metro), and results may differ for rural populations or men. Second, the study relied on self-reported perceptions and experiences, which may be subject to recall bias or social desirability effects. Additionally, while the sample size is adequate for thematic saturation, a larger or more diverse qualitative sample might reveal further nuances or divergent perspectives.

Future research could address these limitations by employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys or experiments with in-depth qualitative work to validate and extend the findings. Comparative studies across different regions of India, between urban and rural consumers, or between genders could provide a richer understanding of how cultural context mediates the relationship between SMM and brand equity. Further, longitudinal research could explore how these dynamics evolve as digital adoption deepens and new social platforms emerge. Finally, studies incorporating the perspectives of brand managers and influencers themselves would offer a more holistic view of strategy and impact.

CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of social media marketing's role in shaping consumer-based brand equity for masstige fashion brands in a rapidly modernizing, culturally distinct region of India. Through in-depth qualitative analysis, the research demonstrates that brand awareness, perceived quality, trust, and loyalty among women in Assam are deeply influenced by SMM strategies that are visually compelling, culturally resonant, and authentically interactive. These findings highlight the necessity for brands to move beyond generic campaigns and instead invest in digital engagement that reflects local values and identities. As regional markets in India continue to digitize, the strategies outlined here offer a blueprint for both scholars and practitioners seeking to build strong, sustainable brands through culturally sensitive, consumer-centric social media marketing.

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