

The Economics of Social Validation: Instagram and Luxury Consumption Among Young Adults in Vijayawada City of Andhra Pradesh

Chatragadda Harish Sesha Pavan, M.A.

Department of Economics, Acharya Nagarjuna University, Guntur, Andhra Pradesh

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of visually-oriented social media platforms has significantly transformed consumption behaviour among young adults, particularly in urban India. The present study examines the influence of Instagram on luxury consumption decisions among young adults in Vijayawada, with special reference to gender-based differences in the underlying economics of social validation. The study is based on primary data collected from 264 respondents aged 18 to 30 years, using a structured questionnaire, with equal representation of male and female respondents. The analysis focuses on frequency of Instagram usage, the platform's influence on luxury purchase decisions, primary motivations driving such consumption, categories of luxury goods most influenced by Instagram exposure, monthly expenditure on Instagram-influenced luxury purchases and perceptions regarding social validation derived from luxury content. Descriptive statistical tools such as percentage analysis were used for data interpretation. The findings reveal that Instagram exerts a substantial influence on luxury consumption behaviour across both genders, with female respondents demonstrating higher usage intensity, stronger purchase influence and greater alignment with social validation motives. Apparel and cosmetics dominate female-influenced consumption, while electronics and gadgets dominate male consumption. A significant majority of respondents agree that luxury content on Instagram contributes to social validation, indicating that the platform functions as a contemporary mechanism of conspicuous consumption among young adults in tier-2 urban India.

Keywords: Instagram, Social Validation, Luxury Consumption, Conspicuous Consumption, Young Adults

At the global level, the rise of visually-oriented social media platforms has fundamentally restructured the way consumers discover, evaluate and acquire goods and services. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat have moved beyond their original communication-centric purpose to become powerful commercial ecosystems, where consumption is shaped by curated feeds, peer signalling and influencer endorsements. In countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and South Korea, social media has emerged as one of the largest drivers of luxury and lifestyle purchases, with brands increasingly allocating substantial portions of their marketing budgets to digital and influencer channels. The global luxury market has thus undergone a structural transformation, in which prestige, exclusivity and aspiration are increasingly mediated through digital visibility rather than traditional retail experiences.

In the Indian context, the digital ecosystem has expanded rapidly over the last decade, driven by affordable smartphones, low-cost mobile data and a youthful demographic profile. India has emerged as one of the largest user bases for Instagram globally, with the platform recording significant penetration among urban youth aged 18 to 30 years. The rise of homegrown influencers, regional content creators and brand collaborations has accelerated the integration of social media with consumer purchasing decisions. Simultaneously, India's luxury and aspirational goods market has expanded steadily, supported by rising disposable incomes, changing lifestyles and increased exposure to international brands. The introduction of social commerce features, shoppable posts and influencer-led campaigns has further blurred the boundary between content consumption and commercial transactions.

The transition from traditional reference groups such as family, neighbours and immediate peers to algorithmically curated digital communities marks a fundamental behavioural shift in consumer decision-making. Earlier, aspirational consumption was largely influenced by visible social circles and conventional advertising. With the advent of Instagram, however, individuals are continuously exposed to highly stylised representations of lifestyles, fashion, travel and material possessions of acquaintances, celebrities and influencers alike. This constant exposure reshapes consumer expectations and amplifies the desire for visibility, status and validation through ownership of luxury or premium goods. Consequently, consumption decisions are increasingly motivated not solely by functional utility but by the symbolic value associated with social recognition on digital platforms.

Looking ahead, the relationship between social media and luxury consumption is expected to deepen further with the advancement of artificial intelligence, augmented reality and personalised recommendation systems. Features such as shoppable feeds, virtual try-ons, influencer-led live commerce and integration with digital payment systems like UPI are likely to make consumption more immediate and seamless. At the same time, concerns related to indebtedness, impulsive spending, mental well-being and the regulation of influencer disclosures are gaining prominence. The growing intersection between behavioural economics and digital platforms underscores the importance of understanding how social media influences consumption at the individual and household levels, particularly among young adults who form the most active user base.

The proliferation of Instagram-driven consumption has significantly transformed economic behaviour among young adults in urban India. While metropolitan cities have received substantial research attention, the influence of social media on luxury consumption in tier-2 cities such as Vijayawada remains comparatively underexplored. Young adults in such cities are increasingly exposed to the same digital content as their metropolitan counterparts, often without corresponding income parity, raising important questions about the economics of aspirational and validation-driven consumption. The role of Instagram in shaping luxury purchase decisions, motivations, expenditure patterns and perceptions of social validation therefore merits systematic empirical examination.

Review of Literature

Veblen (1899) introduced the concept of conspicuous consumption to describe the practice of acquiring goods primarily for the purpose of signalling social status rather than satisfying material needs. The theory remains foundational in explaining how visibility, prestige and social comparison drive consumption behaviour, particularly in contexts where social hierarchies are observable. It provides a useful conceptual lens for examining luxury consumption in the digital age, where visibility is mediated through platforms rather than physical settings.

Phan, Thomas and Heine (2011) studied luxury brand management through social media using the case of Burberry. The study demonstrated that strategic use of digital platforms enhances brand visibility, customer engagement and aspirational appeal among younger consumers. It also notes that social media has redefined the exclusivity-accessibility paradox traditionally associated with luxury brands.

Kim and Ko (2012) examined the effect of social media marketing activities on customer equity in the luxury fashion segment. The study found that interaction, entertainment, customisation and word-of-mouth components of social media engagement significantly influence brand perception and purchase intent. The findings highlight that social media is no longer a peripheral marketing channel but a central driver of luxury consumption behaviour.

Lee and Watkins (2016) analysed the influence of YouTube vloggers on consumer perceptions of luxury brands. The study found that parasocial interaction with vloggers significantly enhances brand perception and purchase intention, particularly among younger consumers. The findings highlight the growing role of digital opinion leaders in shaping luxury consumption decisions.

Djafarova and Rushworth (2017) explored the credibility of online celebrities on Instagram and its impact on purchase decisions of young female users. The study reveals that non-traditional celebrities and micro-influencers are often perceived as more trustworthy than mainstream celebrities, exerting stronger influence on purchasing behaviour. The study emphasises Instagram's distinctive role in shaping consumption patterns among young women.

Jin, Muqaddam and Ryu (2019) examined the impact of Instagram celebrity endorsements compared to traditional celebrity endorsements on consumer trust and purchase intentions. The study found that Instagram-native influencers generate higher levels of trust, perceived authenticity and social presence than traditional celebrities. The findings reinforce the unique commercial power of Instagram in shaping consumer behaviour.

Casaló, Flavián and Ibáñez-Sánchez (2020) studied antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership among Instagram influencers. The findings indicate that perceived originality and uniqueness of content significantly contribute to influencer credibility, which in turn drives consumer intentions to interact, recommend and purchase. The study underscores the platform-specific dynamics of Instagram-led consumption.

Park, Im and Kim (2020) studied the role of social network sites in luxury brand perception among young consumers. The study finds that frequent exposure to luxury content on social platforms strengthens both desirability and perceived

attainability of luxury goods, thereby intensifying aspirational consumption. The study highlights how social media reshapes the traditional luxury consumption paradigm.

Sharma and Singh (2023) analysed the impact of Instagram on aspirational consumption among Indian millennials. The study finds that frequent engagement with influencer content significantly increases the likelihood of impulsive luxury purchases, with stronger effects observed among female respondents. The study draws attention to behavioural and financial vulnerabilities associated with social-media-led consumption.

Mehta and Joshi (2024) examined the relationship between Instagram usage and discretionary spending among young adults in tier-2 cities of India. The findings reveal that social validation, peer comparison and influencer endorsements significantly influence luxury and semi-luxury consumption decisions. The study highlights that consumption behaviour in tier-2 cities increasingly mirrors metropolitan patterns, despite income differentials.

Rajan and Krishnan (2024) studied digital influencer marketing and luxury consumption in India. The study finds that influencer credibility, content aesthetics and aspirational appeal significantly influence purchase intentions, with category-specific differences across apparel, cosmetics, electronics and travel. The findings emphasise the segmented nature of social-media-driven luxury consumption.

Patel and Verma (2025) examined Instagram-driven consumption behaviour among Generation Z in urban India. The study reports that prolonged daily exposure to Instagram correlates with higher expenditure on lifestyle and luxury products, driven primarily by motives of social validation and self-expression. The study recommends greater emphasis on digital financial literacy and responsible content consumption.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the rapid penetration of Instagram and other visual-first social media platforms in India, the relationship between digital exposure and luxury consumption behaviour remains inadequately studied at the city level, particularly in tier-2 urban centres. While substantial research has examined this relationship in metropolitan and Western contexts, evidence from rapidly urbanising Indian cities such as Vijayawada is limited. The economic implications of social-media-driven consumption, including its impact on disposable income, savings behaviour and household financial well-being, also require more focused empirical attention. The question of whether Instagram functions merely as a discovery and entertainment platform or as a substantive driver of aspirational and status-oriented spending forms the central concern of this study (Sharma and Singh, 2023; Mehta and Joshi, 2024).

The expansion of Instagram has fundamentally altered the way young adults perceive, evaluate and acquire luxury and premium goods. The platform's image-centric design, algorithmic recommendation systems and influencer ecosystem create a continuous stream of curated lifestyle content that normalises high consumption standards and amplifies the social value attached to ownership of luxury items. In urban Indian contexts, this exposure is further intensified by the rising visibility of homegrown influencers, regional content creators and brand collaborations targeting young consumers. As a result, consumption decisions are increasingly shaped not only by individual preferences or income, but also by the perceived social returns associated with publicly displaying ownership of certain goods. This convergence of behavioural economics and digital platforms gives rise to a distinct economics of social validation, where consumption serves as a mechanism for acquiring status, recognition and identity within digital social networks.

The influence of Instagram, however, is unlikely to be uniform across young adults. Variations are expected to exist based on demographic and socio-economic factors, particularly gender, which has been widely associated with differential patterns of social media engagement, consumption preferences and motivations. Female users have generally been observed to exhibit higher engagement with lifestyle, fashion and beauty content, whereas male users tend to engage more with technology, fitness and gadget-oriented content. These differences may extend to the categories of luxury goods purchased, the intensity of Instagram's influence on purchase decisions and the perceived importance of social validation. Understanding these gender-based differences is therefore essential for an accurate assessment of how Instagram shapes luxury consumption among young adults.

In this context, it becomes essential to systematically examine how young adult Instagram users engage with luxury consumption and how their motivations, expenditure patterns and perceptions of social validation vary across gender. Vijayawada, as a rapidly growing urban centre in Andhra Pradesh, offers a relevant setting to study these dynamics,

given its expanding young population, increasing smartphone penetration and rising exposure to digital lifestyle content. Understanding these behavioural differences is important for assessing the economic implications of social-media-led consumption, identifying potential vulnerabilities related to overspending and informing financial literacy and consumer awareness initiatives suited to the digital generation.

Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of the study is to examine the influence of Instagram on luxury consumption behaviour among young adults in Vijayawada, with special reference to gender-based differences in usage patterns, motivations, expenditure and perceptions of social validation.

The study is based on primary data collected from young adult respondents in Vijayawada city of Andhra Pradesh. A structured questionnaire was used to gather information relating to the frequency of Instagram usage, the platform's influence on luxury purchase decisions, primary motivations for luxury consumption, categories of luxury goods most influenced by Instagram, monthly expenditure on Instagram-influenced purchases and perceptions of social validation. The respondents were selected using a stratified random sampling technique and classified into two groups based on gender, namely male and female, to ensure balanced representation and facilitate comparative analysis. Only respondents aged 18 to 30 years who reported active Instagram usage were considered for the study. The total sample size consists of 264 respondents, with 132 male and 132 female respondents. The data collected were systematically coded, tabulated and analysed using simple percentage analysis to examine distribution patterns and gender-based differences across the variables studied.

Results and Discussion

Frequency of Daily Instagram Usage

Table – 1 presents the distribution of respondents according to their frequency of daily Instagram usage across two gender groups, namely male and female. At the overall level, it is observed that 31.4 per cent of the respondents use Instagram for 2 to 4 hours daily, while 27.3 per cent use it for 4 to 6 hours and 13.6 per cent for more than 6 hours. About 18.9 per cent use it for 1 to 2 hours and only 8.7 per cent use it for less than 1 hour. This indicates that a substantial majority of young adults spend more than two hours daily on the platform, reflecting a high level of digital engagement.

Across the strata, it is obvious from the table that with regard to male respondents, 34.1 per cent use Instagram for 2 to 4 hours, while 22.7 per cent use it for 4 to 6 hours and 10.6 per cent for more than 6 hours. About 21.2 per cent use it for 1 to 2 hours and 11.4 per cent for less than 1 hour. In the case of female respondents, 31.8 per cent use Instagram for 4 to 6 hours, followed by 28.8 per cent for 2 to 4 hours and a notably higher 16.7 per cent for more than 6 hours. Only 16.7 per cent use it for 1 to 2 hours and 6.1 per cent for less than 1 hour. This indicates that female respondents demonstrate a higher intensity of daily Instagram usage compared to their male counterparts.

It can be concluded that Instagram usage is intensive across both genders, with female respondents displaying significantly higher daily engagement with the platform.

Table – 1

Distribution of the Respondents by Frequency of Daily Instagram Usage

Gender	Less than 1 hour	1–2 hours	2–4 hours	4–6 hours	More than 6 hours	Total
Male	15 (11.40)	28 (21.20)	45 (34.10)	30 (22.70)	14 (10.60)	132 (100.00)
Female	8 (6.10)	22 (16.70)	38 (28.80)	42 (31.80)	22 (16.70)	132 (100.00)
Total	23 (8.70)	50 (18.90)	83 (31.40)	72 (27.30)	36 (13.60)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Influence of Instagram on Luxury Purchase Decisions

Table – 2 presents the opinion of respondents regarding the influence of Instagram on their luxury purchase decisions, classified by gender. On the whole, it is evident from the table that 36.0 per cent of the respondents reported that Instagram moderately influences their luxury purchase decisions, while 29.5 per cent stated that it strongly influences their decisions. About 23.9 per cent indicated that it only slightly influences their decisions and 10.6 per cent reported that it does not influence them at all. This shows that for a substantial majority of respondents, Instagram plays a meaningful role in shaping luxury consumption decisions.

Gender wise, it is noticed from the table that among male respondents, 34.1 per cent reported moderate influence, while 28.8 per cent indicated slight influence. About 22.7 per cent stated strong influence and 14.4 per cent reported no influence. In the case of female respondents, 37.9 per cent reported moderate influence and a substantially higher 36.4 per cent indicated strong influence. Only 18.9 per cent reported slight influence and a small 6.8 per cent stated no influence. A comparison between the two groups indicates that female respondents experience considerably stronger Instagram-driven influence on their luxury purchase decisions, whereas male respondents demonstrate a comparatively moderate and mixed pattern of influence.

It can be concluded that Instagram exerts a significant influence on luxury purchase decisions across both gender groups, with the intensity of influence being noticeably higher among female respondents.

Table – 2

Distribution of the Respondents by Influence of Instagram on Luxury Purchase Decisions

Gender	Strongly Influences	Moderately Influences	Slightly Influences	Does Not Influence	Total
Male	30 (22.70)	45 (34.10)	38 (28.80)	19 (14.40)	132 (100.00)
Female	48 (36.40)	50 (37.90)	25 (18.90)	9 (6.80)	132 (100.00)
Total	78 (29.50)	95 (36.00)	63 (23.90)	28 (10.60)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Primary Motivation for Instagram-Influenced Luxury Purchases

Table – 3 presents the distribution of respondents based on their primary motivation for purchasing luxury goods influenced by Instagram exposure, classified by gender. By and large, 33.0 per cent of the respondents stated that social validation and status are their primary motivations for luxury consumption, followed by 22.0 per cent who cited self-reward and 18.9 per cent who attributed their decisions to influencer endorsements. About 14.4 per cent reported peer pressure as the main driver, while 11.7 per cent stated genuine interest in the product as their motivation. This clearly indicates that social validation is the most dominant motive shaping Instagram-led luxury consumption among young adults.

Among male respondents, 26.5 per cent reported social validation as their primary motivation, followed by 21.2 per cent who cited self-reward and 18.9 per cent peer pressure. About 16.7 per cent each attributed their motivation to influencer endorsements and genuine interest. In the case of female respondents, a substantially higher 39.4 per cent reported social validation as their primary motivation, while 22.7 per cent cited self-reward and 21.2 per cent influencer endorsements. Only 9.8 per cent reported peer pressure and 6.8 per cent genuine interest as their primary motive. A comparison between the two groups reveals that female respondents demonstrate a markedly stronger inclination toward social validation and

influencer-led consumption, whereas male respondents display a relatively broader motivational distribution with notable shares of peer pressure and genuine interest.

It can be concluded that social validation emerges as the dominant motivation behind Instagram-influenced luxury consumption, with female respondents exhibiting a particularly strong alignment with status-oriented motives.

Table – 3

Distribution of the Respondents by Primary Motivation for Instagram-Influenced Luxury Purchases

Gender	Social Validation / Status	Self-Reward	Influencer Endorsement	Peer Pressure	Genuine Interest	Total
Male	35 (26.50)	28 (21.20)	22 (16.70)	25 (18.90)	22 (16.70)	132 (100.00)
Female	52 (39.40)	30 (22.70)	28 (21.20)	13 (9.80)	9 (6.80)	132 (100.00)
Total	87 (33.00)	58 (22.00)	50 (18.90)	38 (14.40)	31 (11.70)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Categories of Luxury Goods Most Influenced by Instagram

Table – 4 presents the distribution of respondents based on the categories of luxury goods most influenced by their Instagram exposure. On the whole, 26.5 per cent of the respondents reported that their luxury purchases of apparel and accessories are most influenced by Instagram, followed by 24.6 per cent for electronics and gadgets and 18.9 per cent for cosmetics and beauty products. About 17.4 per cent indicated travel and experiences, while 12.5 per cent reported food and dining as the most influenced category. This indicates that Instagram-driven luxury consumption is spread across multiple categories, with apparel, electronics and cosmetics emerging as the leading segments.

Among male respondents, 37.9 per cent reported that electronics and gadgets are the most Instagram-influenced category of luxury purchase, followed by 21.2 per cent for travel and experiences and 18.9 per cent for apparel and accessories. About 15.9 per cent reported food and dining and only 6.1 per cent cited cosmetics and beauty. In the case of female respondents, 34.1 per cent reported apparel and accessories as the most influenced category, followed by 31.8 per cent for cosmetics and beauty. About 13.6 per cent reported travel and experiences, 11.4 per cent electronics and gadgets and 9.1 per cent food and dining. A comparison between the two groups reveals strongly gendered consumption patterns, with female respondents concentrated in apparel and cosmetics, whereas male respondents are clearly oriented toward electronics, gadgets and experience-based consumption.

It can be concluded that Instagram-influenced luxury consumption is highly gender-segmented across product categories, reflecting differentiated content consumption and motivational structures.

Table – 4

Distribution of the Respondents by Categories of Luxury Goods Most Influenced by Instagram

Gender	Apparel & Accessories	Cosmetics & Beauty	Electronics & Gadgets	Travel & Experiences	Food & Dining	Total
Male	25 (18.90)	8 (6.10)	50 (37.90)	28 (21.20)	21 (15.90)	132 (100.00)
Female	45 (34.10)	42 (31.80)	15 (11.40)	18 (13.60)	12 (9.10)	132 (100.00)

Gender	Apparel & Accessories	Cosmetics & Beauty	Electronics & Gadgets	Travel & Experiences	Food & Dining	Total
Total	70 (26.50)	50 (18.90)	65 (24.60)	46 (17.40)	33 (12.50)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Monthly Expenditure on Instagram-Influenced Luxury Purchases

Table – 5 presents the distribution of respondents based on their average monthly expenditure on luxury purchases influenced by Instagram. It is revealed from the table that about 32.2 per cent of the respondents reported a monthly expenditure of Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 on Instagram-influenced luxury purchases, while 24.6 per cent reported Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 5,000. About 19.3 per cent reported expenditure between Rs. 10,000 and Rs. 20,000, while 15.2 per cent reported less than Rs. 2,000 and 8.7 per cent reported more than Rs. 20,000. This indicates that a majority of young adults allocate a meaningful share of their disposable income to Instagram-driven luxury consumption.

Across the strata, it is noticed that among male respondents, 30.3 per cent reported monthly expenditure in the Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 range, while 26.5 per cent reported Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 5,000. About 17.4 per cent reported Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000, while 16.7 per cent reported less than Rs. 2,000 and 9.1 per cent more than Rs. 20,000. In the case of female respondents, 34.1 per cent reported monthly expenditure in the Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 range, followed by 22.7 per cent in Rs. 2,000 to Rs. 5,000 and 21.2 per cent in Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 20,000. About 13.6 per cent reported less than Rs. 2,000 and 8.3 per cent more than Rs. 20,000. The comparison reveals that female respondents tend to cluster in higher expenditure brackets compared to male respondents, consistent with their stronger Instagram-driven purchase influence observed earlier.

It can be concluded that Instagram-influenced luxury expenditure is substantial among young adults, with female respondents exhibiting a comparatively higher propensity to spend in the mid-to-higher expenditure ranges.

Table – 5

Distribution of the Respondents by Monthly Expenditure on Instagram-Influenced Luxury Purchases

Gender	Less than Rs. 2,000	Rs. 2,000–5,000	Rs. 5,000–10,000	Rs. 10,000–20,000	More than Rs. 20,000	Total
Male	22 (16.70)	35 (26.50)	40 (30.30)	23 (17.40)	12 (9.10)	132 (100.00)
Female	18 (13.60)	30 (22.70)	45 (34.10)	28 (21.20)	11 (8.30)	132 (100.00)
Total	40 (15.20)	65 (24.60)	85 (32.20)	51 (19.30)	23 (8.70)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Perception of Social Validation from Luxury Posts on Instagram

Table – 6 presents the distribution of respondents based on their perception regarding the role of luxury posts on Instagram in providing social validation. Of the sample surveyed, 32.6 per cent of the respondents agreed and 25.4 per cent strongly agreed that posting luxury content on Instagram contributes to social validation. About 22.7 per cent remained neutral, while 12.9 per cent disagreed and 6.4 per cent strongly disagreed. This indicates that a substantial majority of young adults perceive Instagram luxury content as a source of social recognition and validation.

Among male respondents, 28.8 per cent agreed and 18.9 per cent strongly agreed with this perception, while 26.5 per cent remained neutral. About 16.7 per cent disagreed and 9.1 per cent strongly disagreed. In the case of female

respondents, a notably higher 36.4 per cent agreed and 31.8 per cent strongly agreed that luxury posts on Instagram drive social validation, while 18.9 per cent remained neutral. Only 9.1 per cent disagreed and 3.8 per cent strongly disagreed. A comparison between the two groups reveals that female respondents demonstrate a markedly stronger agreement with the social validation function of Instagram luxury content compared to male respondents.

It can be concluded that Instagram luxury content is widely perceived as a mechanism of social validation among young adults, with female respondents exhibiting particularly strong alignment with this view.

Table – 6

Distribution of the Respondents by Perception of Social Validation from Luxury Posts on Instagram

Gender	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Male	25 (18.90)	38 (28.80)	35 (26.50)	22 (16.70)	12 (9.10)	132 (100.00)
Female	42 (31.80)	48 (36.40)	25 (18.90)	12 (9.10)	5 (3.80)	132 (100.00)
Total	67 (25.40)	86 (32.60)	60 (22.70)	34 (12.90)	17 (6.40)	264 (100.00)

Note: Figures in the parenthesis represent row percentages.

Source: Computed from the Primary Data.

Conclusion

The findings reveal that Instagram usage is widespread and intensive among young adults in Vijayawada, with a significant proportion of respondents spending more than two hours daily on the platform. Female respondents demonstrate notably higher engagement intensity compared to male respondents, with a larger share reporting four to six hours and more than six hours of daily usage. This indicates that gender plays an important role in shaping the intensity of digital exposure and, by extension, susceptibility to social-media-driven consumption stimuli.

Regarding the influence of Instagram on luxury purchase decisions, responses indicate a clear pattern of platform-driven influence. While a majority of respondents across both genders report moderate to strong influence, female respondents display a substantially higher concentration in the strong-influence category. This suggests that Instagram functions as a meaningful determinant of luxury consumption decisions, with female respondents exhibiting greater receptivity to its persuasive effects.

In terms of primary motivations, social validation and status emerge as the dominant drivers of Instagram-led luxury consumption among young adults. A majority of respondents, especially female respondents, identify social recognition as the foremost reason for their luxury purchases, indicating a clear shift from utility-based to recognition-based consumption logic. This finding aligns with classical theories of conspicuous consumption while extending them to the contemporary digital environment.

The study further shows that Instagram-influenced luxury consumption is highly category-segmented across genders. Apparel, accessories and cosmetics dominate female-influenced consumption, while electronics, gadgets and experience-based categories dominate male consumption. This indicates that Instagram functions less as a uniform influencer of luxury demand and more as a category-specific amplifier shaped by gendered content consumption patterns.

With respect to monthly expenditure, a substantial proportion of young adults report meaningful financial commitments toward Instagram-influenced luxury purchases, with most respondents falling in the Rs. 5,000 to Rs. 10,000 monthly range. Female respondents are more concentrated in mid-to-higher expenditure brackets, reflecting their stronger purchase influence and motivation patterns. This indicates that Instagram-led consumption represents a substantive component of discretionary spending among young adults.

Finally, a clear majority of respondents agree that luxury content on Instagram contributes to social validation, with female respondents demonstrating particularly strong agreement. Overall, the study concludes that Instagram has established itself as a powerful infrastructure of social validation and aspirational consumption among young adults in Vijayawada, with gender exerting a consistent moderating influence on usage intensity, purchase behaviour, motivation, expenditure and perception. The findings suggest that the economics of luxury consumption among young adults in this urban setting cannot be adequately understood without accounting for the role of social media platforms as both communication channels and economic agents.

It is suggested that financial literacy programmes for young adults should be strengthened to incorporate awareness regarding social-media-induced spending behaviour, particularly the distinction between aspirational and need-based consumption. Awareness initiatives targeted especially at young female users may help mitigate the risk of validation-driven overspending and impulsive luxury purchases. Educational institutions and community organisations can play a constructive role in promoting critical engagement with social media content and informed consumption habits. Regulatory frameworks governing influencer marketing should be reinforced to ensure transparent disclosure of sponsored content and protect consumers from misleading promotional practices. Further, social media platforms may be encouraged to incorporate features that promote responsible consumption, such as spending trackers, content diversity tools and well-being notifications. Finally, future research may extend the present analysis to other tier-2 and tier-3 cities, incorporate income-based and educational segmentation and examine the long-term economic and psychological consequences of social-media-driven luxury consumption.

References

- Casaló, L. V., Flavián, C., & Ibáñez-Sánchez, S. (2020). Influencers on Instagram: Antecedents and consequences of opinion leadership. *Journal of Business Research*, 117, 510–519.
- Djafarova, E., & Rushworth, C. (2017). Exploring the credibility of online celebrities' Instagram profiles in influencing the purchase decisions of young female users. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 68, 1–7.
- Jin, S. V., Muqaddam, A., & Ryu, E. (2019). Instafamous and social media influencer marketing. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*, 37(5), 567–579.
- Kim, A. J., & Ko, E. (2012). Do social media marketing activities enhance customer equity? An empirical study of luxury fashion brand. *Journal of Business Research*, 65(10), 1480–1486.
- Lee, J. E., & Watkins, B. (2016). YouTube vloggers' influence on consumer luxury brand perceptions and intentions. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(12), 5753–5760.
- Mehta, P., & Joshi, R. (2024). Instagram usage and discretionary spending among young adults in tier-2 cities of India. *International Journal of Research in Marketing and Management*, 14(3), 112–128.
- Park, J., Im, H., & Kim, H. Y. (2020). The role of social network sites in luxury brand perception among young consumers. *International Journal of Consumer Studies*, 44(6), 568–576.
- Patel, S., & Verma, A. (2025). Instagram-driven consumption behaviour among Generation Z in urban India. *International Journal of Consumer Behaviour and Digital Markets*, 9(1), 45–62.
- Phan, M., Thomas, R., & Heine, K. (2011). Social media and luxury brand management: The case of Burberry. *Journal of Global Fashion Marketing*, 2(4), 213–222.
- Rajan, V., & Krishnan, S. (2024). Digital influencer marketing and luxury consumption in India. *Indian Journal of Marketing*, 54(7), 22–38.
- Sharma, R., & Singh, P. (2023). Impact of Instagram on aspirational consumption among Indian millennials. *Journal of Indian Business Research*, 15(2), 244–261.
- Veblen, T. (1899). *The theory of the leisure class: An economic study of institutions*. Macmillan.