

Social, Economic, Cultural, and Composite Consumer Archetypes in Sri Lanka: A Social Cognitive Theory-Based Approach to Strategic Marketing Design

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ABSTRACT

This conceptual paper explores the evolving nature of the modern Sri Lankan consumer through four archetypes: the Cultural Man, Composite Man, Economic Man, and Social Man. In addition to these perspectives, the review examines the emergence of new social class segments, including Traditional Middle Class 1 (TMC1), Traditional Middle Class 2 (TMC2), the New Urban Middle Class (NUMC), and the Traditional Working Class (TWC). By integrating these archetypes with the dynamics of shifting social classes, the study provides a nuanced understanding of consumer decision-making in Sri Lanka. The findings are grounded in Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), selected after comparison with the Theory of Planned Behavior and Consumer Culture Theory for its capacity to capture the reciprocal interplay among personal, behavioral, and environmental factors that underlie long-run shifts in social class identity. The analysis demonstrates how composite, social, cultural, and economic dimensions shape consumer choices across different socio-economic strata. The study further reveals how shifting social class boundaries, particularly the decline of the Traditional Working Class and the rise of the New Urban Middle Class, are redefining consumption patterns, aspirations, and lifestyle choices in the Sri Lankan marketplace. Implications for marketers are discussed, highlighting the need for dynamic, psychologically grounded, and culturally sensitive marketing strategies that address the diverse motivations, cultural influences, and socio-economic transitions shaping contemporary Sri Lankan consumer behavior. As a theory-building contribution based on secondary sources and literature synthesis rather than primary data, the paper proposes measurable constructs and a staged empirical research agenda through which the archetypes and class segments can be validated. The paper underscores the importance of moving beyond income-based segmentation toward identity-driven, aspirational, and inclusive marketing frameworks suited to Sri Lanka's rapidly evolving consumer landscape.

Keywords: Social Archetypes, Social Classes, Sri Lankan Consumer Behavior, Social Cognitive Theory, Marketing Strategy

INTRODUCTION

Modern marketers must focus more on the customer than on products or sales alone. It is not about finding people to buy what is already being sold, but about creating the right products to meet customers' needs. Since the late 1970s, when Sri Lanka opened its economy, the market has undergone a significant transformation. More recently, digital growth, including increased smartphone use, internet access, and the influence of artificial intelligence, has accelerated this change. Shifting demographics and cultural evolution have given rise to a new type of consumer, compelling marketers to quickly recognize and adapt their strategies to prioritize customer needs, a critical factor for business success.

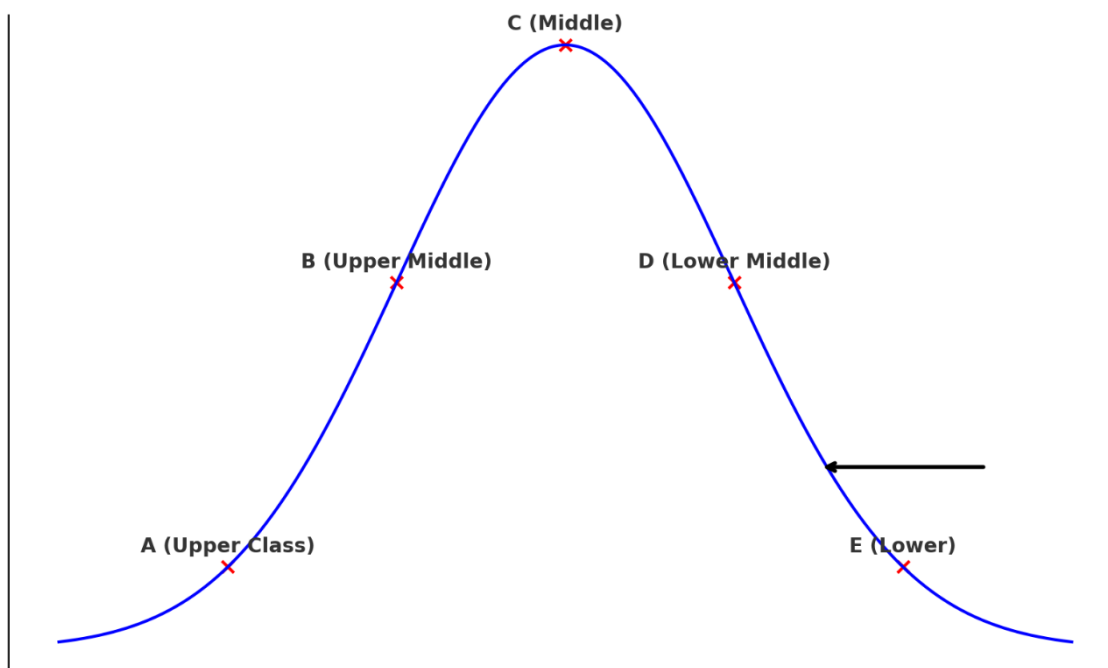
Significant changes are taking place in the Sri Lankan consumer market, where social, economic, cultural, and composite factors increasingly shape consumer behavior and decision-making. Accordingly, four types of

consumers can be identified to better understand different customer perspectives: the Composite Man, Economic Man, Social Man, and Cultural Man.

The Social Man archetype reflects the influence of social factors, particularly social class, on consumer behavior. This paper explores the paradigm shift across different social classes in Sri Lanka and highlights how understanding these transformations can help marketers gain deeper insights into consumers' problems, preferences, and behaviors in today's complex marketplace. Social class influences consumers' judgments and decisions, while these choices simultaneously reflect and reinforce class identity. Understanding the role of social class in consumption is increasingly critical due to growing economic stratification (Shavitt et al., 2016). Extant literature has identified the utility of social class constructs in various marketing strategies, including segmentation (Wedel & Kamakura, 2000). Socioeconomic status has been explained through multiple dimensions, including income (Drentea, 2000), occupation (Oakes & Rossi, 2003), and education (Stephens et al., 2007), with wealth, social capital, and professional opportunities collectively shaping what has been recognized as a multifaceted concept (Carey & Markus, 2016).

Sri Lanka's socio-economic classification can broadly be divided into five categories (A–E), determined by economic, social, and educational factors. Category A represents the upper class, while Category E represents the lowest in terms of social status and educational attainment. Over time, Category E has been shrinking as individuals gradually move upward into higher categories. Industry groups such as Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing primarily correspond to socio-economic groups ranging from E (low-income laborers, small-scale farmers, and manual workers) to C (skilled laborers) and possibly B (supervisory roles and technicians). Professional, Scientific and Technical Activities and Public Administration typically map to higher groups like A1, A2, or B1, where occupations require higher education and professional qualifications (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Social Class Classification in Sri Lanka.



With the shifting of social classes, various paradigm movements can be identified among Sri Lankan consumers. Historically, Sri Lanka's Traditional Middle Class (TMC) was divided into two segments: TMC1, consisting of western-oriented, bilingual individuals working mainly in the corporate sector; and TMC2, more eastern-oriented, primarily native-language speakers employed in government jobs. Although culturally and linguistically distinct, both groups shared similar levels of education, spending power, and social standing, with recognition based on personal identity. However, today, recognition is based less on identity and more on profession, status, and achievements.

The Traditional Working Class has also evolved, giving rise to the New Working Class and Alienated Rural Youth, who have embraced the gig economy and self-employment as new avenues for upward mobility. Many of these groups have subsequently merged into what is known as the New Urban Middle Class (NUMC), in which an individual's exact social or cultural origins have become increasingly difficult to trace due to blurring boundaries shaped by changing economic roles and lifestyles.

This paper highlights the significance of social class in offering fresh perspectives, drawing on four key personas: the composite, social, economic, and cultural consumer grounded in Social Cognitive Theory. The discussion identifies how these dimensions influence consumer decision-making and demonstrates how marketers can leverage insights from these archetypes to formulate more effective strategic decisions. The paper is conceptual in nature: it synthesizes secondary literature, national statistical data, and the authors' professional observation of the Sri Lankan market into an integrative framework, rather than reporting primary survey or interview data. The Theoretical Framework section justifies the choice of SCT against alternative behavioral theories; the Methodological Approach section details the approach used to derive the archetypes and class segments; the Consumer Archetypes and Emerging Social Classes sections develop the archetypes and emerging social classes themselves; the Consumer Decision-Making and Implications sections connect these constructs to consumer decision-making and managerial implications; and the Limitations and Empirical Research Agenda section sets out the measurable constructs and staged empirical agenda needed to validate the framework in future research.

Theoretical Framework: Social Cognitive Perspective

Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), as a psychological framework, illustrates that consumer behavior is shaped by observational learning from others' behavior and outcomes. The theory explains the dynamic relationship between personal factors, behavioral actions, and environmental influences. SCT is particularly valuable for understanding consumer behavior by emphasizing the impact of social interactions, mental processes, and environmental factors on decision-making (Bandura, 1986). The theory also highlights the role of environmental influences, including observational learning and social support, alongside individual elements such as outcome expectations and self-efficacy in explaining why certain behaviors occur (Bandura, 1991).

In SCT, an individual's behavior is influenced by a combination of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Nursanti et al., 2025). Environmental factors exist outside the individual, either in social or physical form. The social environment encompasses interactions with friends, family, and colleagues, while the physical environment includes factors such as weather conditions or spatial lighting. Personal factors encompass fundamental cognitive and emotional abilities, including self-efficacy, individual traits, expectations, self-regulation, and reinforcement. An individual anticipates specific outcomes resulting from their actions, and these expectations influence their decision to carry out those actions.

The concept of triadic reciprocal causation, central to SCT, refers to the functional interdependence between events, whereby cognitive, affective, and biological factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences interact dynamically and shape one another in a bidirectional manner (Bandura, 1991). Each activity depends on situational circumstances and socio-structural constraints and opportunities. Bandura (1991) further identifies the environment as comprising three elements: the imposed environment, the selected environment, and the constructed environment.

Applied to the Sri Lankan consumer context, SCT provides the theoretical lens through which four main consumer archetypes are identified as key factors influencing the decision-making of different and evolving social classes.

Why social cognitive theory: A comparative justification

Several behavioral theories offer plausible lenses for examining Sri Lankan consumer transitions, and it is useful to position SCT against these alternatives before adopting it as the organizing framework for this paper. The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) explains behavior primarily through attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control, treating intention as the proximal determinant of action. TPB is well suited to predicting discrete, planned purchase decisions, but it is less equipped to capture the longer-run, identity-level

shifts such as movement between social class segments or the gradual adoption of “Mod-Tradi” consumption patterns that this paper seeks to explain, because it treats the social environment largely as a normative input rather than as a reciprocal force that consumers actively shape and are shaped by.

Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) offers a closer alternative, as it foregrounds the symbolic, identity-driven, and socio-historically situated nature of consumption, and shares this paper’s interest in how class, culture, and identity intersect in the marketplace. However, CCT is primarily an interpretive tradition that privileges thick, ethnographically derived meaning over the kind of structured, multi-factor explanation of behavior change that this paper requires. It is strong on describing what consumption means to consumers but offers comparatively little guidance on the cognitive mechanisms, such as self-efficacy or outcome expectancy, through which observed social change is translated into individual purchasing behavior.

SCT is adopted in this paper because its triadic reciprocal causation model theorizes the dynamic interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors, allowing the four archetypes (Composite, Cultural, Economic, and Social Man) to be treated not as static demographic categories but as interacting cognitive and environmental influences on behavior (Bandura, 1991). This is particularly relevant to the Sri Lankan context, where consumers are simultaneously influenced by inherited cultural norms (environmental), evolving self-concepts of status and aspiration (personal), and observable shifts in peers’ consumption (behavioral, via observational learning). Unlike TPB, SCT accommodates vicarious learning and modeling as primary mechanisms of change, which better explains how new consumption patterns diffuse across social class boundaries. Unlike CCT, SCT retains a structured account of the cognitive variables self-efficacy and outcome expectancy that connect macro-level social change to micro-level purchasing decisions, which is the link this paper aims to draw between shifting social classes and marketing strategy. SCT is therefore treated as the most suitable, though not the only viable, framework for this study, and the comparative discussion above is intended to make that choice transparent rather than to dismiss the explanatory value of TPB or CCT in other applications.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper is conceptual and interpretive in nature. It does not report primary data collected through surveys, interviews, or focus groups; rather, it synthesizes secondary sources, peer-reviewed literature on social class and consumer behavior, national statistical reports (including the Department of Census and Statistics’ Labour Force Survey and Central Bank of Sri Lanka economic indicators), and the authors’ cumulative professional observation of the Sri Lankan market into an integrative conceptual framework. This approach follows an established tradition in marketing theory-building, in which conceptual papers precede and inform subsequent empirical validation by first articulating constructs, naming emergent phenomena, and proposing the relationships among them.

The four consumer archetypes, Composite, Cultural, Economic, and Social Man, were derived through directed thematic analysis of the consumer behavior and social stratification literature, using SCT’s triadic structure (personal, behavioral, environmental factors) as the organizing logic. Each archetype was constructed to correspond to a distinguishable cluster of influences on Sri Lankan consumer decision-making identified across multiple independent sources: household and life-cycle research informed the Composite Man; studies of values, religion, and intergenerational change informed the Cultural Man; macroeconomic and expenditure data informed the Economic Man; and literature on status, reference groups, and digital identity informed the Social Man. The boundaries between archetypes are treated as analytically distinct but empirically overlapping, consistent with SCT’s premise that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors operate in continuous interaction rather than in isolation.

The five emerging social class segments (TMC1, TMC2, NUMC, TWC, and NWC) were similarly identified through a synthesis of Sri Lanka’s official A–E socio-economic classification, sector-level employment data, and prior sociological accounts of class transformation in Sri Lanka (Bamunusinghe, 2013; Liyanage, 2009), cross-referenced against observable shifts in occupation, sector of employment, language orientation, and consumption behavior. Each segment was operationally distinguished using four consistent criteria: (i) dominant sector of employment, (ii) language and educational orientation, (iii) primary source of economic mobility

(inherited position, public-sector employment, private enterprise, or gig-based earning), and (iv) the consumption behaviors most frequently associated with the segment in the literature and in sector-level statistics.

This classification approach has clear limitations that bear directly on the gaps identified by reviewers. First, the operational criteria above, while consistently applied, are derived from the authors' synthesis rather than from a validated measurement instrument; they should be read as a proposed coding scheme for future empirical testing rather than as an established taxonomy. Second, the conceptual nature of the paper means that the prevalence, boundaries, and stability of each segment have not been statistically verified against a representative sample of the Sri Lankan population. The paper's contribution is accordingly framed as theory-building, offering testable constructs and a structured rationale for the archetypes and class segments rather than as theory-confirming. The Limitations and Empirical Research Agenda section proposes measurable constructs and a concrete empirical agenda through which the framework presented here can be validated.

CONSUMER ARCHETYPES

Composite Man

The Composite Man framework examines the evolving family life cycle and its implications for consumer behavior, as influenced by various demographic and societal trends. This concept provides a structured approach to understanding how shifts in household dynamics shape purchasing patterns and market demand. By examining these trends, the Composite Man framework aids in identifying gaps in consumer needs and informing marketing strategies that align with changing family structures.

In the twenty-first century, gender equality and equity have become critical issues as societies work to correct historical imbalances between men and women, focusing on ensuring fair access to resources and bridging opportunity gaps (Marufu & Matanga, 2025). Sri Lanka, a South Asian nation with a population of approximately 21 million, falls under the lower-middle-income country category. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 positioned Sri Lanka 102nd out of 153 nations, highlighting gender disparities across health, education, economic participation, and political representation, with women accounting for only 31.8% of the total labor force (Labour Force Survey, 2021).

Human behavior has often been interpreted through the lens of one-sided determinism, where actions are seen as either dictated by external environmental factors or driven solely by internal dispositions. SCT identifies psychosocial functioning through triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1991), in which cognitive, affective, and biological factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences interact dynamically. The concept of future time perspective is reflected in various ways: individuals develop beliefs about their capabilities, anticipate potential outcomes of their actions, set personal goals, and strategize plans to achieve desired results. By exercising forethought, they can self-motivate and direct their behavior toward meaningful objectives (Bandura, 1991).

The two main variables identified in SCT, outcome expectancy and self-efficacy beliefs, are central to the Composite Man archetype. Outcome expectancies refer to individuals' beliefs regarding the potential results of performing certain behaviors (Bandura, 1991). People tend to engage in actions that they believe will enhance positive outcomes and reduce negative consequences (Young et al., 2005). Individual drivers of decision-making further encompass affective, cognitive, and cognitive dimensions (Lavidge, 1961; Rajagopal, 2021; Sofi et al., 2020). A considerable body of research has examined the roles of husbands, wives, and adolescents in various aspects of household decision-making (Lee & Beatty, 2002). While women traditionally held primary decision-making authority in domestic matters, the modern era has seen a notable shift as more women engage in external employment (Singh & Nayak, 2014).

Cultural Man

Culture can be viewed as a cognitive framework that offers knowledge and direction regarding individual behavior, shaped by personal values, social norms, and long-standing traditions (Khan et al., 2024). Consumers' preferences, behaviors, and purchasing patterns are shaped by culture across diverse markets, and with the

globalized economy, the cultural relevance of products and services is increasingly significant from a marketing perspective.

Different beliefs and value systems developed within families shape culture and exert a high impact on decision-making. Religion is a key area in this regard. From a Sri Lankan youth community perspective, while religion holds personal significance for many young people, their openness in expressing it publicly through worship or social media varies widely. A significant number choose to keep their religious beliefs and practices private, possibly due to concerns about judgment or lack of strong motivation (Subasinghe et al., 2021).

The weakening of close family connections has also had significant impacts, with many young people increasingly relying on external social networks to guide their life choices and career paths. Social media has intensified this reliance, often bringing more challenges than benefits. Many youth express frustrations about limited personal freedom in Sri Lanka, with numerous individuals aspiring to move away from their hometowns or the country in pursuit of more independent lifestyles. In this setting, some view higher education as a stepping stone toward achieving such aspirations.

Given this cultural climate of growing distrust and individualism, marketers must prioritize authenticity, transparency, and emotional intelligence in their strategies. Understanding these deep-rooted societal sentiments is essential for crafting messages that resonate with consumers who are increasingly skeptical and driven by personal aspirations rather than collective values. Cultural migration among youth further reflects a shift away from traditional family structures.

Food represents another dimension of culture exhibiting notable consumer trends. There is an increasing trend toward convenient food options, including ready-to-eat items such as rolls, cutlets, frozen baked goods, instant pizzas, and pre-cooked curries, all easily available in supermarkets. Ready-to-drink beverages such as tea and coffee have also gained popularity, with local brands adopting strategies from international counterparts to appeal to a wider customer base.

Consistent with SCT, which emphasizes that consumer decision-making is influenced by a combination of personal, environmental, and behavioral factors (Nursanti et al., 2025), culture constitutes a part of both the internal and external environmental influences on decision-making. Marketing decision-makers must therefore consider diverse cultural values, beliefs, purchasing patterns, and lifestyles when formulating strategies.

Economic Man

Economic factors influencing consumer behavior can be categorized as macroeconomic and microeconomic. Micro factors encompass individual demand and supply-related considerations, while macroeconomic factors include wider economic indicators such as inflation, interest rates, and overall economic growth, which have the potential to impact entire industries and national economies.

Economic indicators released by the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL) highlight several macroeconomic dynamics that marketers must consider when crafting strategies in an expanding yet volatile economy. In 2022, the Sri Lankan economy experienced nominal growth. Despite this, GDP per capita declined, reflecting reduced individual purchasing power. Private consumption remained comparatively strong through Personal Consumption Expenditure (PCE), indicating that while inflation and currency depreciation pressured consumers, spending behavior adapted. This represents a key consideration for marketers who must balance value-driven offerings with rising cost sensitivity.

Several sectors present emerging opportunities and challenges for marketers. The insurance industry has seen significant growth, particularly in life insurance adoption, suggesting increased consumer interest in financial security. The banking sector has similarly recorded a notable rise in savings and deposits, signaling cautious financial behavior. Marketers in financial services and fintech should leverage this cautious optimism by promoting savings products, insurance plans, and secure investment options. The food expenditure ratio, representing the share of household income spent on food, remains high, with estate sector households allocating

a disproportionate amount to alcohol, tobacco, and related products. These spending patterns highlight both ethical considerations and segmentation opportunities for marketers targeting underserved communities.

The telecommunications sector has witnessed extraordinary growth, particularly in internet and broadband usage. However, digital access remains uneven, with approximately 40% of Sri Lankans reportedly never having used the internet, according to 2023 survey data. This digital divide presents both a challenge and a strategic opportunity for marketers, who can expand digital engagement through inclusive platforms while maintaining hybrid or offline strategies to reach less connected audiences. Furthermore, increasing income inequality reflected in a rising Gini Coefficient and growing poverty indices such as the Headcount Index (HCI) and Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) underlines the importance of inclusive, socially responsible marketing.

Social Man

Social factors significantly influence consumer behavior, shaping individuals' purchasing decisions. Elements such as family, reference groups, social status, and cultural norms all play a role in determining how consumers view and choose products and brands. Consumers' choices are strongly shaped by the decision-making context, and the growing influence of social networks is shifting consumer behavior, as choices are increasingly driven by the desire to engage in identity play, accumulate social capital, and cultivate a personal brand (Willman-Iivarinen, 2017).

Within the SCT framework, social learning, peer recognition, and the size of the user base are key factors affecting the quality and quantity of knowledge contributions (Mustafa et al., 2024). Societal factors such as embedded community norms and personal incentives work together to shape user behavior, with peer recognition playing a key role in influencing individual engagement. Social structures are established to shape, direct, and oversee human activities through recognized rules and regulations.

By observing the social environment, such as witnessing others' successes or learning through vicarious experiences, people can adopt behaviors as if they had personally experienced those events (Nursanti et al., 2025). Behavior is formed within a social environment, encompassing beliefs and choices aimed at benefiting both the individual and the surrounding community (Jordi et al., 2025). Affective components operate at two levels of social context: a broader social context (neighborhood, society) and a narrower social circle (family, friends). Both environments shape personal norms, which subsequently affect behavior directly and indirectly through attitudes (Bamberg & Möser, 2007).

Social motives, including group identity and status-seeking, have been shown to significantly impact behavior. Status-seeking refers to the drive to obtain products or brands that symbolize prestige and social standing, aimed at boosting one's self-image and position within social groups (Simonetti et al., 2025). Peer groups, defined as close-knit circles of individuals of similar age engaged in comparable activities, also exert a strong influence on behavior and decision-making (Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

EMERGING SOCIAL CLASSES IN SRI LANKA

TMC1: Traditional Middle Class 1

One of the most significant effects of colonization in Sri Lanka was the strong influence of Western ideas, values, and systems, which remain embedded in Sri Lankan society today. Sri Lankan society continues to reflect signs of its colonial past through class stratification, which is a key sociological concept for explaining how society is divided into different levels typically measured by income, wealth, occupation, power, and social standing. A major outcome of colonization was the formation of a native elite group known as the Traditional Middle Class (TMC), which adopted Western lifestyles and thinking, effectively facilitating a societal transition from traditional to more modern orientations.

TMC2: Traditional Middle Class 2

Over time, a new group within the Traditional Middle Class, referred to as TMC2, began to replace TMC1 as the dominant force. TMC2 emerged from the free education system and is predominantly monolingual, working primarily in government employment with a strong orientation toward national issues. Key members include school principals, teachers, university lecturers, and other professionals working mainly in the public sector. While TMC1 blends Western ideas with traditional values, TMC2 largely adheres to traditional orientations, emphasizing family background and job status. Although familiar with Western lifestyles, TMC2 does not fully adopt them.

New Urban Middle Class (NUMC)

As the private sector became the main engine of economic and social change in Sri Lanka and government roles began to decline, the country's social structure shifted, leading to the emergence of the New Urban Middle Class (NUMC). Though relatively small, this group plays a pivotal role in shaping the country's economy and culture. The NUMC includes individuals who either inherited wealth, such as property and land, or built it through business and investments. Those who inherit wealth often live modestly and focus on sustainability, while those who earn it tend to seek social status through material goods and social network building. This behavior reflects Mead's (1934) concept of Symbolic Interactionism, which suggests that societal values often influence people more profoundly than personal desires. As noted by Bamunusinghe (2013), in contemporary society, what one owns has become more significant than who one is. Members of the NUMC are typically business-minded, skilled in trade, and possess strong purchasing power.

The rise of digital and information communication technologies has brought major changes globally, improving the quality of life while also reflecting the NUMC's capacity to adapt to and leverage technology. In the banking and finance sector, for example, one clear trend among the NUMC is the growing demand for exclusive services such as Premier, Private, or Prestige Banking personalized offerings that match the lifestyle expectations of this group.

A key feature of Sri Lanka's NUMC is the rise of 'Mod-Tradi' consumers, modern consumers who combine elements of both tradition and modernity, even when these influences appear contradictory. Consumer behavior in Sri Lanka is shaped by three main forces: traditionalization, modernization, and a mix of both, known as post-modernization. These influences have created unique and recognizable patterns in consumption that are visible across many real-life examples.

Traditional Working Class (TWC)

In addition to the TMC and NUMC, the Traditional Working Class (TWC) represents another key group. This segment includes unskilled and semi-skilled laborers along with lower-level clerical workers, and makes up a substantial portion of the wage-earning population. The TWC often faces social and economic challenges that limit their ability to fully participate in consumer culture and enjoy the advantages of modernization (Liyanage, 2009). However, the traditional working class is gradually shrinking with the evolution of the New Working Class.

New Working Class (NWC)

The New Working Class refers predominantly to young people working in industries such as free trade zones, construction, or the unorganized sector, often because they were unable to secure white-collar employment. This definition has evolved to encompass a broader group of workers engaged in digital mobility, including those in app-based services such as food delivery, ride-hailing, e-commerce, and rapid commerce logistics, frequently utilizing personal vehicles. While this group may lack the English language proficiency required for white-collar positions, they demonstrate rapid adoption of technology to participate in the unorganized economy. In the construction industry, meanwhile, the hiring of international labor has become increasingly common for large-scale development projects due to project deadlines and a shortage of dedicated local labor.

Figure 2. Social Classes Emerged with Different Consumer Archetypes in Sri Lanka.

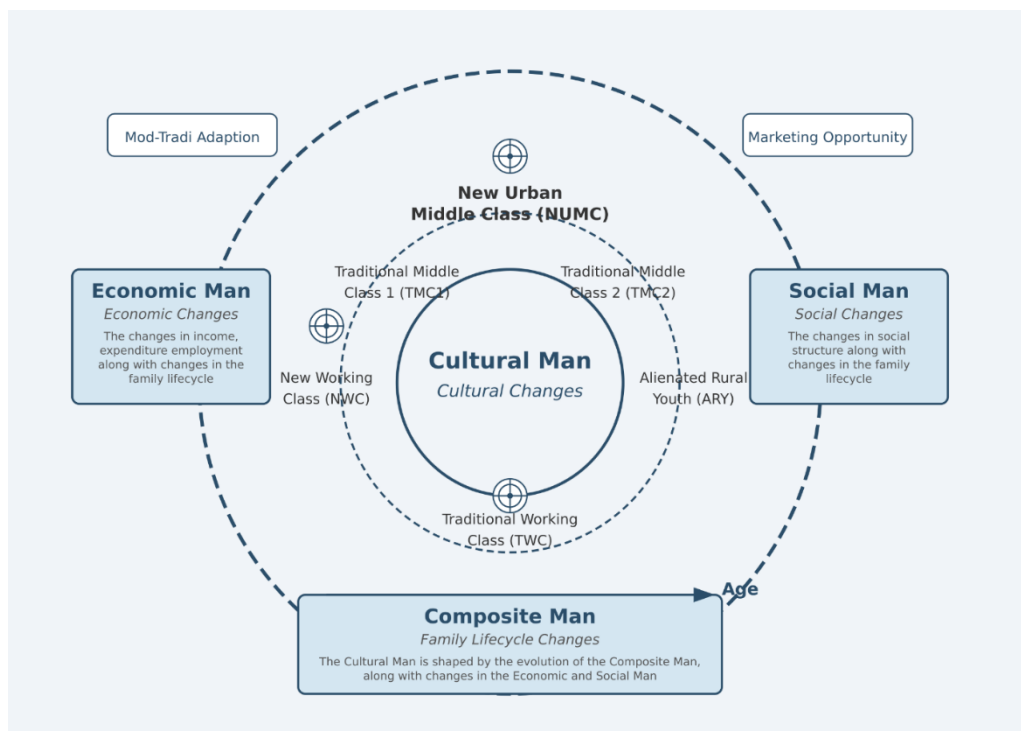


Figure 2 illustrates the different social classes that have emerged, shaped by economic, social, cultural, and composite archetypes. The trends indicate that the Traditional Working Class is shrinking, corresponding to Category E of the Socio-Economic Classification, while the New Working Class and Alienated Rural Youth are transitioning toward the New Urban Middle Class.

CONSUMER DECISION-MAKING

Understanding these different social classes is important for analyzing the diverse decision-making contexts of consumers in the Sri Lankan market, providing marketers with valuable insights for developing effective strategies. Frequent and unpredictable changes in the market environment further impact consumer decision-making. The traditional framework for understanding this process is the five-stage model of the consumer buying process (Kotler & Keller, 2012). Belch and Belch (2009) expanded on this model by examining the internal psychological processes associated with each stage.

Decision-making comprises various stages influenced by both internal and external drivers. As identified in this review, social, cultural, and economic factors significantly impact consumer decision-making. In addition, composite aspects and internal drivers demonstrate notable influence. Internal information search involves drawing on personal memory, including past experiences with a product or service. In contrast, external information search involves seeking input from others, asking friends and family about their experiences when considering a new purchase (Stankevich, 2017).

According to Belch and Belch (2009), consumer decision-making is significantly influenced by external factors such as culture, social class, reference groups, and situational variables. Culture remains one of the most complex factors to study in consumer behavior. As the global market continues to evolve, there is ongoing debate about whether consumption patterns are becoming more uniform, with lifestyles increasingly reflecting those of the industrialized world, influenced by similar demographic changes (Stankevich, 2017). This review has thus identified various factors alongside the composite, social, cultural, and economic archetypes that shape different social classes and impact consumer decision-making in Sri Lanka.

Implications For Sri Lankan Marketers

The evolving landscape of the Sri Lankan consumer, examined through the lenses of the Composite Man, Economic Man, Social Man, and Cultural Man, urges marketers to move beyond traditional rational models of behavior. By incorporating the Social Cognitive perspective, the study highlights how personal beliefs, social dynamics, and environmental contexts collectively shape consumer decisions. For marketers, this implies the need to adopt a more holistic, psychologically grounded approach, one that acknowledges emotional, social, and cognitive influences rather than relying solely on functional or price-based appeals.

Changing social trends and shifting ideas of social status offer valuable opportunities for marketers. Status and personal identity remain critically important today, with people increasingly defining themselves by what they own rather than by their values, character, or personality. This is especially evident on social media platforms such as LinkedIn, YouTube, and TikTok, where young people share content to demonstrate their presence, skills, and talents, opportunities that may not have previously been accessible due to social barriers. The aspirational nature of such content illustrates the degree to which today's consumers seek recognition and social status, exemplified by users posting about the shopping malls they visit, the food they eat, the clothes they wear, or images with luxury goods to project a successful lifestyle.

The segmentation of emerging social classes TMC1, TMC2, NUMC, TWC, and NWC further underscores the necessity for tailored marketing strategies. Each group reflects distinct cultural values, economic priorities, and lifestyle aspirations, requiring marketers to create nuanced campaigns that resonate with their unique characteristics. NUMC consumers may seek aspirational and technology-driven messaging, while TWC audiences may prioritize value, trust, and community connection. Understanding these differences enables brands to engage consumers more meaningfully and foster long-term loyalty.

The evolving socio-economic classifications and shifting social classes also highlight the need for more dynamic and segmented marketing strategies. As Category E continues to shrink and more consumers transition into higher socio-economic groups such as the NUMC, purchasing power, aspirations, and lifestyle choices are becoming more diverse and sophisticated. Traditional segmentation based solely on income is no longer sufficient; marketers must also consider cultural orientation, professional identity, and status-driven aspirations when positioning products and services. The rise of the gig economy and self-employed consumers suggests opportunities for affordable, flexible, and technology-enabled offerings that align with upward mobility. Moreover, the blurring of traditional class boundaries requires brands to build inclusive marketing approaches that emphasize lifestyle, value creation, and aspirational identity rather than rigid class markers. By aligning marketing strategies with these shifting paradigms, businesses can strengthen consumer engagement and build long-term loyalty in Sri Lanka's transforming market.

Limitations and a Measurable Empirical Research Agenda

As a conceptual paper, this study's principal limitation is the absence of primary data to test the proposed archetypes and class segments against observed behavior. The constructs introduced here are therefore best understood as testable propositions rather than confirmed findings, and the discussion below converts each archetype and class segment into constructs that could be operationalized in future empirical work.

For the four consumer archetypes, the SCT-derived constructs of self-efficacy and outcome expectancy could be measured using adapted multi-item Likert scales (following established SCT scale-development practice; Nursanti et al., 2025; Mustafa et al., 2024) and tested for their association with purchase intention and brand-switching behavior within each archetype. For the Composite Man, a measurable construct would be household decision-making authority, operationalized through items capturing who initiates, influences, and finalizes a purchase across categories. For the Cultural Man, religiosity salience and intergenerational value distance could be measured using validated scales and tested against willingness to adopt convenience-oriented or globally branded products. For the Economic Man, price sensitivity and value-for-money orientation could be measured through stated willingness-to-pay and discretionary spending ratios drawn from household expenditure surveys. For the Social Man, status-seeking and reference-group influence could be operationalized through established status-consumption scales and social media engagement metrics.

For the social class segments, membership could be operationalized using the four criteria proposed in the Methodological Approach section: sector of employment, language/educational orientation, source of economic mobility, and consumption behavior, allowing TMC1, TMC2, NUMC, TWC, and NWC to be coded as a categorical variable in survey instruments. A future stratified survey, sampling respondents across Sri Lanka's A–E socio-economic categories and urban/rural strata, could test whether self-reported consumption behaviors and aspirational attitudes cluster along these proposed segment boundaries, using cluster analysis or latent class analysis to assess whether the five-segment structure proposed here is empirically supported or whether an alternative number of segments fits the data better. Qualitative methods, in-depth interviews or focus groups with members of each proposed segment, could complement this by validating whether the segment labels and boundary criteria are recognizable to the consumers being classified, or whether revision is needed.

Future research should pursue this empirical validation in stages: first, qualitative work to refine and confirm the operational definitions of each archetype and class segment; second, a quantitative survey instrument built on the constructs above, administered across a representative sample stratified by the existing A–E socio-economic classification; and third, longitudinal tracking of a subset of respondents to test whether the class transitions described conceptually in this paper (for example, movement from TWC toward NUMC) are observable over time. Such a programme would allow the framework proposed here to move from a theory-building contribution to an empirically validated segmentation tool for Sri Lankan marketers.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the evolving Sri Lankan consumer landscape through four distinct archetypes: the Composite Man, Cultural Man, Economic Man, and Social Man, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory. The analysis demonstrates that consumer decision-making in Sri Lanka is a multidimensional process shaped by the interplay of personal, behavioral, and environmental factors. The emergence of new social class formations, particularly the New Urban Middle Class (NUMC) and the New Working Class (NWC), alongside the decline of the Traditional Working Class, represents a fundamental shift in the structure of Sri Lankan consumer society. As a conceptual contribution, the paper's value lies in naming and structuring these shifts and in proposing the measurable constructs set out in the Limitations and Empirical Research Agenda section through which they can be empirically tested.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS, CONFLICT OF INTEREST, AND DATA AVAILABILITY

Ethical approval: This study is a conceptual paper based entirely on secondary literature, publicly available national statistical data, and the authors' professional observation of the Sri Lankan market. It did not involve primary data collection from human participants or animals, and therefore, no formal ethical approval was required.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest related to this work.

Data availability: This conceptual paper did not generate new primary datasets. All secondary statistical data referenced (including Department of Census and Statistics and Central Bank of Sri Lanka indicators) are publicly available from the respective government sources cited in the references.

Declaration Of Generative Ai and Ai-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with language editing, manuscript formatting, and structural refinement of the text. All intellectual content, arguments, analysis, theoretical frameworks, and conclusions presented in this paper are entirely the work of the authors. The authors have reviewed, edited, and take full responsibility for all content published in this paper. Generative AI tools were not used to generate original research ideas, data, or academic claims.

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