

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

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# Upward mobility implications on the aspirant middle class in emerging economies

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This article unearths the salient factors that trap the aspiring middle class in their progression towards a stable middle class in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. The study utilises a quantitative case study design, drawing on a sample of 449 aspirants and 578 middle-class heads of households from the 2021 Gauteng City-Region Observatory Quality of Life Survey. A binary logistic regression model was used to analyse these salient factors (key determinants) and their impact on the social mobility of the aspirant middle class. Findings reveal a significant relationship between social mobility and education, racial inequality, asset ownership, access to economic opportunities and proximity to amenities. We suggest local government policies that positively influence the conditions of these determinants for sustained mobility of the aspirant middle class over time.

## KEYWORDS

aspirant, City of Johannesburg, logistic regression, middle class, South Africa, upward mobility

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The rise of the middle class has been an important global matter, especially in emerging democracies like South Africa. The growth of the middle class is critical for advancing inclusion and stability, the development of the economy, poverty reduction and better governance, particularly in developing countries where the majority of the poor are mostly excluded (Kiogora, 2018; Sandhya Krishnan & Hatekar, 2017). However, despite receiving public services and social welfare transfers, many South Africans are still unable to move up the social ladder into a stable middle class (Schotte et al., 2018). In addition, the UNDP South Africa model (United Nations Development Programme, 2020) prediction shows that 34% of middle-class households will fall into the category of vulnerable class households, with about 32 million (34%) of the population predicted to sink into poverty. These households have a predicted per capita expenditure

just above the Rands (1138) Upper Bound Poverty Line. While these households are not poor, the risk of falling into poverty triples compared to the established middle-class households (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Most of these individuals may have managed to transcend poverty but still find themselves unable to progress into a stable middle class. This is partly due to policies that target poor households and ignore households above the poverty line. Consequently, there is prevalence of the aspirant middle class. The aspirant middle class is now a growing class in metropolitan areas. It comprises individuals who earn a higher income than the indigent thresholds, yet their income is too low to afford the middle-class lifestyle (Birdsall et al., 2014; Kiogora, 2018; Shimeles & Ncube, 2015; Visagie, 2015). In this article, aspirants or 'aspirant middle class' are defined as individuals at risk of transcending poverty because of economic shocks or natural disasters. For example, an economic shock could occur if a household member falls

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ill or suffers a drop-in income because of an economic downturn (Kiogora, 2018). This was recently evident in the COVID-19 pandemic disaster (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). This phenomenon is also evident in Latin America, where significant progress in reducing poverty and inequality has been made. Yet, those who exit poverty and join the aspirant class are still at substantial risk of falling back into poverty (Inter-American Development Bank, 2015). According to Levy et al. (2021), over 20 years after the country's independence, most of South Africa's population remained trapped in chronic poverty, with restricted lateral mobility into the middle class. Despite the prominence given to the rising middle class in fostering inclusion, stability and growth of the economy, research on the phenomenon of key determinants that transcend aspirants into a stable middle class in South African urban contexts has been rare. As such, this article responds to the following questions:

- What are the key determinants of social mobility and their influence on the upward mobility of the aspirants towards becoming a stable middle class in Johannesburg, South Africa?
- What are the key strategies that could aid the upward mobility of the aspirants?

This article contributes to knowledge by first determining factors that logically are considered an explanation for the progression of the aspirants. Then, the article defines and justifies the selection of factors that inform the strategies for enabling the upward mobility of aspirants towards becoming part of the regular middle class. Finally, the article merges poverty alleviation strategies with strategies for maintaining middle-class status to suggest possible recommendations for aspirants' upward mobility. The problem of growing the middle class today necessitates solutions that traditionally cannot be found in solutions to poverty alleviation and economic development. As a result, this study contributes to the rethinking of a new approach that provides new insights into growing the middle class by expanding beyond the poor to include the aspiring middle class. Thus, this study strengthens and expands on the existing approaches to class analysis. Furthermore, it incorporates the differentiation between the middle-class and the aspiring middle-class into a broader social stratification schema in an urban context. This will assist in appropriately targeting municipal strategies that promote the growth of the middle class. A few studies in the literature do locate the middle class just above the poverty line. However, these studies fail to acknowledge that being above the poverty line provides a preliminary indication, as some of those currently in the aspiring middle-class might transcend into the stable middle-class. This article fills a gap in the empirical literature on inclusive growth and the dynamics of social mobility for the aspiring middle class as they move towards becoming the secure middle class. The rest of this article is arranged as follows. The first section reviews the literature on the determinants of the social mobility of aspirants. After that, the materials and methods are followed by the results, discussion and conclusions.

## 2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

This section provides a literature review for the study. First, the historical development of the middle class in South Africa is presented. Second, theoretical perspectives and operationalisation of social mobility are outlined. Thereafter, the review of the constructs that define the aspiring middle-class is presented. Finally, the conceptual framework and the contribution to literature are discussed.

### 2.1 | The historical development of the middle class in South Africa

According to Garcia-Rivero et al. (2003); Schotte et al. (2018), South Africa was and continues to be one of the most unequal societies in the world. This situation was mostly left behind by decades of colonialism and apartheid politics. The democratisation of South Africa made it possible for formerly excluded people to join the traditional middle class. As a result, several efforts were made to measure the social structure and the middle class—primarily the black middle class. The Weberian and Marxist approaches have been widely used in this regard. It is well-known that the previous government in South Africa, through its apartheid policy, favoured the 'white' race at the expense of blacks, coloureds and Indians in terms of economic, political and social well-being (Garcia-Rivero et al., 2003). In terms of income, the white population was and continues to be considerably higher than the other population groups. Despite the inequality, the middle class has increased considerably from 1994 to the present (Garcia-Rivero et al., 2003). It is important to highlight that the black population has progressed well in social mobility, with the black middle class rising from 3.3% to 7.8% between 1994 and 2000. This significant increase in the black population—proportionally the largest—seems to be the primary cause of the middle-class expansion in South Africa. Between 1994 and 2000, the coloured population seemed to have advanced as well, while the Indian population stayed constant. The reason being that the economic system was open, leading to the appointment of blacks, coloureds and Indians (primarily black people) to positions formerly held by the 'white' middle-class.

During the democratic era after 2000, the middle class saw a slight expansion, with the white population gaining the most and the black population assisted by affirmative action at the upper level of the middle class. In other words, the middle class has been assimilating members of the black community, but only at the very top (professionals). Southall (2010) notes that since 1994, black economic empowerment policies have contributed to the emergence of a small African capitalist elite. Mabasa (2019) added that the government's procurement policy and the restructuring of public enterprises have contributed immensely to this drive to create a black bourgeoisie.

The developments above point to the simultaneous growth of the stable middle class and the proportion of people that can be regarded as vulnerable. Since 2018, 25% of South Africans have been classified as stable middle-class or elite, with access to stable labour-market income identified as a key determinant of economic stability

(Schotte et al., 2018). According to Burger et al. (2017) and Visagie and Posel (2013), the stable middle class comprises 30%–55% of the population. Schotte et al. (2018) argue that vulnerability in South Africa is currently driven by a lack of jobs and the prevalence of precarious forms of work, which have constrained the development of an emergent middle class. According to Garcia-Rivero et al. (2003); Levy et al. (2021), unemployment affects the poorest sector of the black population more than any other group. Hence, this explains the current pattern where most urban dwellers are aspirants, having lost jobs and facing difficulty getting absorbed into the labour market.

## 2.2 | A theoretical perspectives of class analysis

In studying social mobility, clarity must be provided on the assumptions and theoretical underpinnings of the concept of class being investigated to operationalise class status. This allows claims about class to be empirically tested. There are three central schools of thought that concern the contemporary analysis of class, namely the Weberian class analysis, the Marxist class analysis and the most recent Goldthorpe class schema. According to Pyakurel (2001), the Weberian class analysis considers the stratification of class according to three categories: the economic class as represented by the goods and services including income possessed by individuals; the social class as characterised by honour and prestige enjoyed by the individuals; and the political power or party class as represented by the power exercised by individuals. Another viewpoint of stratification was pioneered by Karl Marx in Marx, Engels, Moore and Aveling (1974). According to Marx's school of thought, the history of the existence of societies is one of the class struggles. Thus, different types of classes tend to develop based on different roles that individuals accomplish in the productive scheme of a particular society. Marx's school of thought proposes that the conflict between the competing economic and social classes is a fundamental feature of society and is dominant as a foundation of social change. It further proposes that persons in different relations to the means of production inherently tend to have opposed interests. The Goldthorpe's framework of operationalising class is famously derived from the 'Nuffield social mobility studies' (Goldthorpe et al., 1980; Halsey et al., 1980) which has recently become popular in sociological tradition (Savage & Egerton, 1997). The Goldthorpe's class schema uses work-related grouping and roles in its stratification. As indicated by Penn (1981) and Nunn et al. (2007), the Nuffield mobility enquiry proposed a seven-class model stratified according to occupational groups and roles, namely: (i) executive level and specialised professions; (ii) junior management and less specialised professions; (iii) professions that are intermediate; (iv) proprietors in micro-businesses; (v) professions with low technical and supervisory roles; (vi) professions that are semi-routine; and (vii) professions that are routine.

This article leans towards the Weberian approach which considers the stratification of class according to the economic class as represented by the goods and services, including income, possessed by individual aspiring middle-class as well as the social class as

characterised by honour and prestige enjoyed by the individual aspiring middle-class.

The aspiring middle-class is generally categorised as individuals who earn a higher income than the indigent threshold, with income that is too low to afford the middle-class lifestyle. According to Shimeles and Ncube (2015), about 60% of those regarded as middle-class are still considered as aspiring middle-class. This is concurred in findings from Latin America (see Birdsall et al., 2014; IDB, 2015; López-Calva & Ortiz-Juarez, 2011) Asia, (World Bank, 2019a, 2019b) and Africa (James, 2019; Visagie, 2015; Van Aardt, 2016). Movement in and out of the middle-class by the aspiring middle-class in Africa is frequent and that this class remains vulnerable and unstable. Neglecting this particularly vulnerable group results in their regression back into poverty as a result of negative economic shocks (World Bank, 2019a). In South Africa, the aspiring middle-class remain fragile and insecure (James, 2019; Netshitenzhe, 2015). This has resulted in them losing pride in their professions, or engagement in nation-building, or shaping of positive value systems for society. Instead, the aspiring middle-class see their purpose as fighting for survival and attempting to climb up the steep social ladder.

As a result of their vulnerability and uncertainty, the conduct of the aspiring middle-class is consequently driven by the fear of descending into poverty. However, those considered to be aspiring middle-class in South Africa are determined to live and imitate the lifestyle of the middle-class regardless of the fear of slipping back into poverty (James, 2019). Using the City of Johannesburg (CoJ) as a case, for the household to be considered poor and benefit from Free Basic Services (FBS) under the Expanded Social Package (ESP) Programme, the total household income should be less than R5 900 (US\$393) per month or R 66 (US\$4.4) per capita per day. Thus, the households that earn above R5 900 (US\$400) or R60 (US\$4) per capita per day cease to benefit from free basic services and other services offered through the ESP, such as food parcels and job pathways. These households therefore graduate to become the aspiring middle-class with inherent characteristics of a vulnerability that may result in their slipping back into poverty.

Birdsall et al. (2014) definition of the aspiring middle-class, is adopted in this article. The aspiring middle-class earn US\$4–US\$10 (R60–R150) per capita per day. This correspond to the CoJ ESP maximum income threshold of \$4 to be considered for FBS.

## 2.3 | A theoretical perspectives of key determinants of social mobility

The arguments presented in the literature suggest numerous potential key determinants that could affect the growth of the middle-class. Firstly, the meritocratic framework argues that when individuals do not have the essential educational credentials, they have a low probability of upward mobility and their risks of regressing into poverty are high. The returns to education are therefore consistently higher for all levels of education than no education at all (Goldthorpe, 2016; Ncube et al., 2011; Shimeles & Ncube, 2015). The meritocratic framework

therefore lends itself to a hypothesis that individuals who have accomplished higher education are most likely to be upwardly mobile where merit is the qualification that an individual has achieved, which is the outward demonstration of inner capacities and skills. The meritocratic framework is also consistent with the 'capability approach' discussed by Roybans (2005), as it enables individuals to realise their capabilities or what they are ultimately able to do and to be.

Goldthorpe (2016) noted that while formal education is important, other 'non-meritocratic' conditions also have a meaningful role. These non-meritocratic characteristics have been argued in the literature as relating to ascribed characteristics more than achieved ones. Therefore, the following identified individual characteristics of the household head, apart from educational qualifications, that determine movement along the social gradient focus based on household size, race, health, degree of asset accumulation and locational factors (Burger et al., 2017; Schotte et al., 2018; Shimeles & Ncube, 2015). Thus, progression into the middle-class can be determined by the individual's race and Blacks are often disadvantaged compared to their White counterparts (Fournier & Koske, 2012; Meiring et al., 2018; Weiss, 1970; Wright, 1978). This phenomenon is apparent, particularly in South Africa, as a result of the inherited socioeconomic inequalities and structural legacies of the apartheid rule (Meiring et al., 2018). Household sizes can potentially reduce adult equivalent income, suggesting that larger households find it harder to improve their economic wellbeing (Schotte et al., 2018; Woolard & Klasen, 2005). The assets held by households at the beginning also have a significant influence on subsequent change in income, therefore the households that have a poor assets base find it harder to improve their levels of income (Woolard & Klasen, 2005). Regions that have stronger social capital as captured by mutual trust tend to have a larger middle-class. The growth of the middle-class is also a function of the degree of ethnic polarisation which is a proxy of social cohesion and to some extent the quality of available social capital in the given space (Shimeles & Ncube, 2015). The Nuffield social mobility studies argued that the factors that lead to social mobility are the economic change that results in the change in occupational structure (Nunn et al., 2007). Thus, the growth of the middle-class is positively correlated with the level of economic development as measured by GDP per capita, which results in greater opportunities and job creation (OECD, 2019; Shimeles & Ncube, 2015). Woolard and Klasen (2005) concur that households with fewer members employed at the beginning and with a significant number of unemployed members find it harder to raise their levels of income and progress to higher classes. The effect of gender on social mobility is emphasised by Nunn et al. (2007) and Schotte et al. (2018), as women often suffer particularly huge employment penalties compared to men.

In Weber's theory, the first dimension of social inequality is class which he defined based on an individual's market situation. That is, class is based on the unequal distribution of economic or financial rewards due to the differential abilities of people to sell their skills within society's market place and thus, it is not just based on the ownership or lack of ownership of the means of production as argued by Marx (Bendix, 1974). In this sense, Weber believed that the

development of the market economy will increase the demand for jobs such as administrators and managers and subsequently expand the middle class which according to him consists of the white-collar professionals (i.e., upper middle class) and petty bourgeoisie or entrepreneurs (i.e., lower middle class). Thus, Weber argued that an individual's technical skills and educational qualifications can aid his/her mobility within and between classes.

The second dimension of social inequality in Weber's work is status which refers to the difference between social groups in the amount of prestige (i.e., the respect and social honour given to some people in society) that they are accorded by others. The third dimension is party or the ability to organise. Party in this sense refers not just to 'political parties' but any organised group of individuals who try to gain power and influence society including trade unions and pressure groups. Overall, Weber argued that both economic and non-economic factors belie social stratification and thus stratification is not just the product of economic factors as is the case in the Marxian tradition.

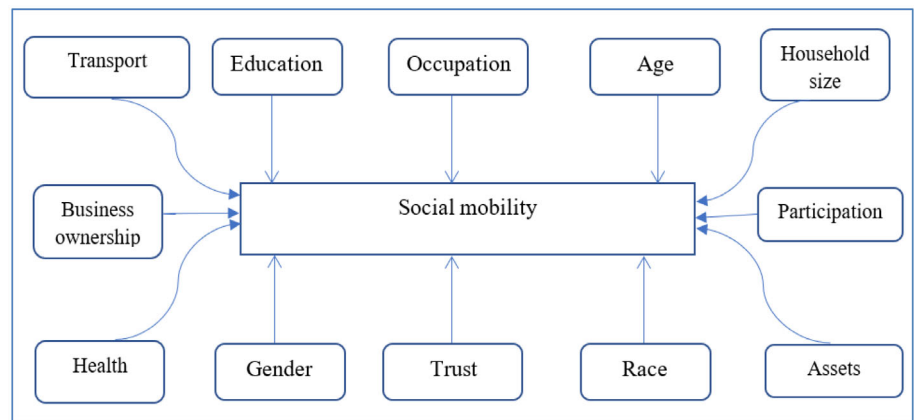
Weber's approach, therefore, and in the context of the present study, provides a flexible way to explain social stratification or inequality using factors like age, gender, race, education, occupation and income, given that the position of these socioeconomic groups can be described in general terms relating to either their market situation, status and their ability to organise or a combination between them. Figure 1 summarises Weber's position and show the conceptual framework for key determinants of social mobility in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa.

Figure 1 provides a simplified conceptual framework of the study. It suggests that both economic (such as income) and non-economic (such as race and gender) factors are important in explaining the basis of social mobility.

### 3 | MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article utilised a quantitative case study design to analyse the determinants of social mobility and their influence on the upward mobility of the aspirants towards becoming a stable middle class in the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. Primary data from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (2021) contacted in the 135 wards of the City of Johannesburg was used as a sampling frame for 2070 households from which the aspirants and the middle class were drawn. Aspirants were defined as households earning between US\$4 and US\$10 (R60 and R150) per capita per day (Birdsall et al., 2014; Statistics South Africa, 2016). This income level identifies individuals who have a lower chance of being considered for FBS in the CoJ based on the Expanded Social Policy income threshold (City of Johannesburg Municipality, 2021). This income level also recognises individuals who are short of being regarded as middle class based on the same Expanded Social Policy income threshold. Individuals captured by the US\$4–US\$10 (R60–R150) daily per capita thresholds are considered vulnerable to slipping back into poverty (Birdsall et al., 2014). These individuals are above the poverty line but not the middle class (Van Aardt, 2016). When this income definition was applied to the

**FIGURE 1** Conceptual framework for key determinants of social mobility. Source: Author's construct based on Weber's theory of social stratification.



2070 households, the aspirant households retained 449 aspirant households and the middle class retained a sample of 578 households.

#### 4 | EMPIRICAL MODEL

This article modelled a binary logistic regression analysis to select the key determinants of social mobility using the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (2021) survey data. Empirically, logistic regression has been widely applied in various studies that attempt to establish determinants of social mobility and also in class analysis when trying to predict membership of being poor, middle class or other higher classes (Bossuroy & Cogneau, 2013; Che Mat et al., 2016; Haile, 2018; López-Calva & Ortiz-Juarez, 2011; Sokołowska, 2013). The binary logistic regression analysis was modelled using a dichotomous dependent variable (socioeconomic class): 0 = 'aspirants' and 1 = 'middle class'. This is consistent with other studies that describe the use of the dummy dependent variable of 0 and 1 in their model where a value of 1 is assigned if success or social mobility is occurring and a value of 0 if there is no success or social mobility (Che Mat et al., 2016; Seltman, 2018). Following Tabachnick and Fidell (2007), the probability of success (belonging to the middle class), was determined with the following formula:

$$Pr(Y=1) = \frac{1}{1+e^{-u}} \quad (1)$$

where  $Y$  is the aspirant middle class or middle class;  $Pr(Y=1)$  is the probability of belonging to the middle class;  $u$  is a linear combination of the predictors, and  $e$  is the error term.

Correspondingly, the probability of failure (belonging to the aspirant middle class) is

$$Pr(Y=0) = 1 - \frac{1}{1+e^{-u}} \quad (2)$$

where  $Y$  is the aspirant middle class or middle class;  $Pr(Y=0)$  is the probability of belonging to the aspirant middle class;  $u$  is a linear combination of the predictors, and  $e$  is the error term. Moreover,  $u$

represents the log odds of belonging to the middle class and is the linear combination of subjective indicators. Thus

$$u = \beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \beta_2 x_2 + \dots + \beta_n x_n \quad (3)$$

where  $\beta_0$  and  $\beta_1 \dots \beta_n$  are the constants and logistic regression coefficients (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The constant  $\beta_0$  and coefficient  $\beta_1 \dots \beta_n$  are computed so that the likelihood of the data is at a maximum. By assigning 0 (if aspirant) and 1 (if middle class) based on the data from the Gauteng City-Region Observatory (2021), one can calculate the likelihood of a household progressing from being the aspirant middle class to becoming a stable middle class. Following Seltman (2018), the odds ratio can be calculated as the ratio of the probability of success to the probability of failure, presented:

$$(Y=1) = \frac{PrPr(Y=1)}{(Y=1)} = \frac{PrPr(Y=1)}{PrPr(Y=0)} \quad (4)$$

The odds of being in the middle class (where  $Y=1$  indicates success) hold the same information as the probability of being in the middle class; thus, the greater the odds, the greater the probability. Specifically, where the probability ranges from 0 to 1, the odds range from 0 to  $\infty$ , (infinity).

The dependent variable was the socioeconomic class status of the head of the household measured as 0 = aspirant middle class, with earnings of US\$4–US\$10 (R60–R150) per capita per day; and 1 = middle class, with earnings of between US\$10 and US\$50 (R150–R750) per capita per day (Birdsall et al., 2014). The theoretical framework identified the independent variables that represented the key determinants of social mobility. The theoretical framework identified education; access to economic opportunities such as employment and business opportunities that result from economic growth; household size; households' asset base; gender; inequality reflected in population groups; social cohesion reflected by the degree of mutual trust and participation in available social networks; individual motivation; individual health status; improved transportation system; proximity to amenities; access to basic water services and access to information through technology such as the internet.

**TABLE 1** Descriptive statistics of the key determinants of social mobility.

	Class status	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Proximity to amenities	Aspirants	449	-2.062	1.148	-0.042	0.944
	Middle class	578	-2.062	1.148	0.033	1.041
Water	Aspirants	449	0.000	1.000	0.847	0.361
	Middle class	578	0.000	1.000	0.935	0.247
Education	Aspirants	446	1.000	5.000	2.097	1.023
	Middle class	571	1.000	5.000	3.182	1.133
Trust	Aspirants	449	0.000	1.000	0.310	0.464
	Middle class	578	0.000	1.000	0.410	0.492
Asset Index	Aspirants	449	-3.464	1.182	-0.433	1.059
	Middle class	578	-3.486	1.182	0.311	0.836
Participation Index	Aspirants	449	-1.191	3.339	-0.310	0.717
	Middle class	578	-1.214	3.494	0.199	1.087
Population group	Aspirants	449	1.000	4.000	1.430	0.985
	Middle class	577	1.000	4.000	2.200	1.369
Gender	Aspirants	449	1.000	2.000	1.310	0.464
	Middle class	578	1.000	2.000	1.240	0.426
Transport	Aspirants	391	1.000	5.000	2.460	1.096
	Middle class	354	1.000	5.000	2.430	1.023
Own a business	Aspirants	449	0.000	1.000	0.100	0.295
	Middle class	578	0.000	1.000	0.220	0.412
Unemployed	Aspirants	196	0.000	1.000	0.220	0.418
	Middle class	196	0.000	1.000	0.090	0.289
Health status	Aspirants	449	1.000	4.000	1.700	0.615
	Middle class	578	1.000	3.000	1.630	0.540

Source: Authors' own construction from QoL Data (2021).

As in the case of multiple regression, the prediction equation in logistic modelling included a linear combination of the predictor variables. In this article, with 15 predictors. The odds of being in the middle class from being an aspirant, given the combination of scores ( $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_{11}$ ) is presented as:

$$-Y_i = \frac{e^{\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_{14} x_{11}}}{1 + e^{\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_{14} x_{11}}} \quad (5)$$

where  $(\beta_0 + \beta_1 x_1 + \dots + \beta_{11} x_{11})$  is the probability of being an aspirant or in the middle-class category based on the combination of predictors indicated above.

## 5 | RESULTS

This section presents the results of the influence of the key determinants of social mobility in enabling and promoting upward mobility of the aspirants in the CoJ. The results address the objective of this article to identify the key determinants of social mobility and their influence in the context of urban municipalities in promoting the progression of aspirants to become part of a stable middle class.

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for key determinants of social mobility. The descriptive statistics below indicate that the aspirants fared much less well than their counterparts in terms of these determinants.

The descriptive statistics above indicate that several factors could hamstring the upward mobility of the aspirants. For example, most aspirants have low levels of asset ownership and community engagement, trust and confidence; live far away from amenities; have low levels of education; lack access to health facilities, are unemployed; and lack entrepreneurial skills. The descriptive statistics also show that most applicants come from women-led Black African households.

Table 2 shows the estimated parameters and the odds of the covariates of social mobility obtained from the literature and included in the binary logistic regression. The sign of the estimated parameter is sufficient to conclude whether the independent variables (identified key determinants of social mobility) had a positive or negative influence on the dependent variable (class status; Wooldridge, 2002). Furthermore, the influence of the key determinants of social mobility on class status could be examined by looking at the odds ratios, which reflect the value of the choice of whether there is a change in the level of social mobility or not. (Che Mat et al., 2016).

The logistic regression results in Table 2 identified five predictors that are the most significant in explaining the social mobility of the



**TABLE 2** Impact of the determinants of social mobility on class status.

Dependent variable: Class status (social mobility)				
Independent variable	B	Odds ratio	95% CI for odds ratio	
			Lower	Upper
Education less than matric (reference)				
Matric	0.48 <sup>NS</sup> (0.39)	1.61	0.75	3.43
Certificate or diploma	1.10 <sup>**</sup> (0.43)	3.01	1.31	6.95
University degree	2.13 <sup>**</sup> (0.74)	8.44	1.99	35.61
Postgraduate degree	2.55 <sup>*</sup> (1.11)	12.82	1.45	113.28
Gender male (reference)				
Female	-0.09 <sup>NS</sup> (0.32)	0.91	0.49	1.72
Population group: Black African (reference)				
Coloured	2.08 <sup>***</sup> (0.6)	8.02	2.46	26.08
Indian/Asian	1.87 <sup>***</sup> (0.59)	6.46	2.04	20.42
White	1.31 <sup>*</sup> (0.56)	3.70	1.24	11.07
Community trust	0.55 <sup>NS</sup> (0.32)	1.73	0.92	3.25
HH is unemployed	-0.78 <sup>NS</sup> (0.42)	0.46	0.2	1.05
Business ownership	1.25 <sup>**</sup> (0.49)	3.49	1.35	9.07
Participation in social networks	0.14 <sup>NS</sup> (0.19)	1.16	0.79	1.70
Health status of HH	0.00 <sup>NS</sup> (0.24)	1.00	0.63	1.59
Household assets base	0.34 <sup>*</sup> (0.15)	1.41	1.05	1.89
Improvement in transport	0.02 <sup>NS</sup> (0.14)	1.02	0.78	1.35
Proximity to amenities	0.33 <sup>*</sup> (0.17)	1.39	1.00	1.94
Model $\chi^2 = 95.99, p = 0.000$				
Pseudo $R^2 = 0.38$				
N = 896				

Note: <sup>NS</sup>Not significant; Regression coefficients (standard errors in parentheses).

Source: Authors' own construction from QoL Data (2021).

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*Significant at  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*Significant at  $p < 0.001$ .

aspirants. These predictors are education, economic opportunities relating to entrepreneurship; inequalities among the population groups; asset base; and proximity to amenities. The results also show the odds of the head of the household being in the middle class versus being an aspirant. The model was statistically highly significant at less than 1% significance level ( $F = 95.99, p = 0.000$ ), and explained 38% of the variance more than the model without covariates (Nagelkerke = 0.38). The binary logistic regression model in Table 2 is discussed below. Firstly, the findings from the logistic regressions implied that education attainment, especially post-matric level by the aspirants, significantly predicted the likelihood of their being in the middle class. There was no statistically significant difference between matriculants and non-matriculants ( $\beta = 0.48, p = 0.218$ ). However, the educational attainment of aspirants with matric and above statistically significantly predicted the chance of being in the middle class. Those with a college or diploma certificate have 3.01 times the odds of progressing to a stable middle class. The beta coefficient was statistically significant at the 5% level ( $\beta = 1.10, p = 0.010$ ). University and postgraduate degrees improved the odds ratio to 8.44 and 12.82 times, respectively. The beta coefficient for those with a university

degree was statistically significant at the 1% level ( $\beta = 2.13, p = 0.004$ ), while it was statistically significant at the 5% level ( $\beta = 2.55, p = 0.022$ ). According to Statistics South Africa (2019), there has been a modest increase of about 24% in tertiary enrolment and about 100% in secondary school enrolment between 2012 and 2019. These statistics support the notion that higher-income households are more likely to advance in education than households from lower quintile households. Secondly, the population group significantly predicted the likelihood of being in the middle class. Using Black Africans as the reference group, the Coloureds had a better chance of being in the middle class compared to Black Africans. The odds of being in the middle class are eight times greater for coloured household heads than black African households. At the 1% level, the beta coefficient was statistically significant ( $\beta = 2.08, p = 0.001$ ). Indians and Asians had a better chance of being in the middle class than black Africans. The odds ratio of being in the middle class is 6.4 times for Indian and Asian households compared to Black African households. At the 1% level, the beta coefficient was also statistically significant ( $\beta = 1.87, p = 0.001$ ). Whites had a better chance of being in the middle class than black Africans. The odds of being in the

middle class are 3.7 times higher for white household heads compared to black household heads. At the 5% level, the beta coefficient was statistically significant ( $\beta = 1.31$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ). All the results show a better likelihood of being in the middle class relative to black Africans. Statistics South Africa (2019) reported a decline in the Gini coefficient, from 0.62 in 2009 to 0.59 in 2019. Black Africans had the highest Gini coefficient, followed by coloureds, then Indians and Asians, with white people having the lowest coefficient. The more unequal a society is, the harder it is for its members to advance from one level to another (and vice versa). Thirdly, the results suggest that more significant opportunities to start own business predicted the likelihood of aspirants moving up the social ladder. If the aspirants were to own the business, they would improve their odds of being in the middle class by 3.5 times. At the 5% level, the beta coefficient was statistically significant ( $\beta = 1.25$ ,  $p = 0.010$ ). Surprisingly, at a 5% significance level, the aspirants' employment status was statistically insignificant in predicting socioeconomic class ( $\beta = -0.78$ ,  $p = 0.064$ ). According to Stats SA, since 2022, the contribution to total turnover by small enterprises in South Africa has been positive, with an overall increase in turnover from R7.0 trillion in 2013 to R10.5 trillion in 2019. Fourthly, the accumulation of assets by aspirants significantly increases their chances of being in the middle class. The result relating to the accumulation of assets indicated that the odds of being in the middle class is 1.41 times for the households that were able to accumulate the assets under consideration. At the 5% level, the beta coefficient was also statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.34$ ,  $p = 0.021$ ). A household's asset ownership is measured by its asset scores. The trend in asset acquisition in South Africa has been encouraging. South Africa's average asset score rose from 8.7 in 2009 to 9.8 in 2015. Since most, if not all, of the 18 assets being looked at are already owned by wealthy South Africans, the average asset score suggests that less fortunate South Africans are getting access to more of these assets, which reduces inequality. Even though black Africans still had the fewest assets overall, their average asset scores grew faster than any other group, from 8.7 in 2009 to 9.8 in 2019. Fifthly, proximity to amenities significantly increased the chances of being in the middle class. The result on proximity to amenities indicated that the odds of being in the middle class are 1.39 times for the households that were able to walk within 15 min to amenities around them. At the 5% level, the beta coefficient was also statistically significant ( $\beta = 0.33$ ,  $p = 0.049$ ). The following factors were insignificant: having a matric, improvement in transport, participation in social networks, community trust, employment status and gender. These factors reflect the effects of people's becoming middle class rather than their causes.

## 6 | DISCUSSION

The results indicate that the determinants of social mobility in metropolitan cities are education, economic opportunities relating to entrepreneurship, inequalities among the population groups; asset base; and proximity to amenities. Firstly, the findings indicated that the aspirants' education attainment, especially at the post-matric level, significantly predicted the likelihood of being in the middle class. The

link between educational attainment and job opportunities is supported by Statistics South Africa (2018), which found that unemployment was highest among those who had dropped out without completing secondary schooling. Their analysis also confirms that completing secondary education in South Africa is not enough to secure a job as it was in the past. According to the Solidarity Research Institute (2015), the salaries of those with further education increase exponentially as they grow older and gain experience. Therefore, improvement in access to quality education beyond the matric level is imperative. Secondly, the population group significantly predicted the likelihood of being in the middle class. Using black Africans as the reference group, coloureds, Indians and whites had a better chance of being in the middle class. Thus, income and educational inequalities are reflected along the racial line, whereby blacks are more marginalised than other races. Socioeconomic disparities and structural legacies inherited from apartheid rule are well known in the South African context, owing to the deliberate marginalisation of the majority black population in terms of access to political participation, economic opportunity, financial resources and quality education (Meiring et al., 2018). Thirdly, the results suggest that more significant opportunities to start one's own business predicted the likelihood of aspirants moving up the social ladder. Entrepreneurship will diversify income sources for aspirants beyond employment, resulting in resilient citizens. Promoting the informal sector is crucial to ensure that it survives alongside the formal sector. Cities could do this through smart formalisation and streamlining regulations and law enforcement against it, thus becoming self-sustainable financially and organisationally. On the contrary, the statistically insignificant result on employment concurs with earlier assertions by Quadrini (2000) that households that depend solely on employment face the risk of moving to lower positions of wealth compared to those with other sources of economic opportunities like starting up a business. This is an important lesson for cities that being employed alone is not enough to move aspirants up the social ladder. Even if the aspirants think they have jobs, their ability to move up may be limited if the city's job market is full of low-paying jobs, especially for Black Africans. Fourthly, the accumulation of assets by aspirants significantly increases their chances of being in the middle class. This concurs with Anderson (2012), who described the poverty trap threshold as a critical minimum stock of assets required for the household to guarantee an increase in its economic livelihood into the future. Woolard and Klasen (2005) argued that the number of durables owned by households significantly positively influences subsequent income change. This means poor households have more difficulty raising income since they own few assets. Finally, proximity to amenities significantly increased the chances of being in the middle class. The World Bank (2018) argued that locating people closer to economic centres is necessary for accessing economic opportunities. This is supported by Kahrik et al. (2016), who emphasised the 'proximity' criterion as the popular reason for choosing residence in the inner cities around the globe. Proximity is therefore valued because of the overall comfort and time-saving aspects for all household members and its economic benefits, such as reduced transportation costs. It also gives you the option of biking or walking to many places from your home.



## 7 | CONCLUSIONS

This article analyses and presents the key determinants of social mobility and their influence on the upward mobility of the aspirant middle class in South Africa by drawing from literature and utilising GCRO QoL Survey Data from 2021. The article operationalised key potential determinants of upward mobility through the literature review and modelled them using the binary logistic regression technique to determine their impact on the upward mobility of aspirants. Findings from the logistic regression reveal a significant relationship between social mobility and education, racial inequality, asset ownership, access to economic opportunities and proximity to amenities. The findings are necessary to provide a strategy that focuses on improving the quality of education through early childhood development and leveraging intergovernmental relations. Also, addressing asset accumulation through improving enforcement of property rights, addressing racial inequality and improving access to opportunities by reducing the cost of doing business, creating decent employment and preferential procurement; and ensuring spatial developments that promote proximity to amenities by aspirants.

The article highlighted that the problem of growing the middle-class today necessitates solutions that traditionally could not be found in solutions to poverty alleviation and economic development. This study, therefore, contributed to the rethinking of a new approach that provides new insights to help grow the middle-class. Thus, this study strengthened and expanded on the existing approaches to class analysis. Furthermore, it incorporated the differentiation between the middle-class and the aspiring middle-class into a broader social stratification schema in an urban context. This will assist in appropriately targeting municipal strategies that promote the growth of the middle class. Literature locates the aspirant middle class just above the poverty line. However, it fails to acknowledge that being above the poverty line provides a preliminary indication, as those aspiring to the middle class face the risk of progressing into a stable middle-class. This article fills the gap in the empirical literature on inclusive growth and social mobility dynamics for the aspiring middle-class as they progress towards stable middle-class. It draws the attention of the local government officials to include aspirants excluded from government social policy.


### CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available publicly on: <https://www.datafirst.uct.ac.za/dataportal/index.php/catalog/GCRO/about>

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