All That Glitters Is Gold: Toward a Theory of Sensory Flamboyance and Subtlety in Consumption

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Sensory flamboyance is proposed to be a currency of cultural capital, used to negotiate community membership. Bigger, gaudier clothing, strong scents, loud music and spicy food are interpreted as part of an empowering strategy employed by a class of people in India largely deprived of social power and economic independence.

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“While driving back to the apartment, I looked into the rearview mirror. Mr. Ashok was wearing a t-shirt. It was like no t-shirt I would ever choose to buy at a store. The larger part of it was empty and white and there was a small design in the center. I would have bought something very colourful, with lots of words and designs on it.”

Balram Halwai, domestic helper and driver, observing the clothing preferences of his employer in the Man Booker Prize-winning novel “The White Tiger” by Aravind Adiga

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Marketers use a variety of sensory appeals to communicate about their brands to consumers (Krishna 2012), but these may not be equally efficacious across consumers. We investigate whether basic preferences for sensory flamboyance versus subtlety are structured sociologically and by early childhood experiences, rather than by individual dispositions. The opening quote depicts an Indian driver in a low status occupation, from a lower caste and economic background, who favours “louder,” more visually prominent product designs, such as flashier, gaudier clothing, compared to his employer who is higher in social status, caste and cultural capital (Holt 1998; Bourdieu 1984). The relationship between status, power and conspicuous consumption of branded products has been studied (Veblen 1899; Belk, Bahn and Meyer 2001; Rucker and Galinsky 2008; Han, Dreze and Nunes 2010), but what structures basic preferences for sensory flamboyance?

Varying levels of cultural capital (i.e. distinctive tastes, skills and knowledge) typically manifest in unique styles of taste and consumption among members of different classes (Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Ustuner and Holt 2010). India’s deep rooted class and caste hierarchies suggest that consumption would reflect the assumed social hierarchies. Lower cultural capital (LCC) is associated with lower economic and lower symbolic capital (Bhattacharyya and Belk 2017; Belk and Ghoshal 2017). Could sensory flamboyance (versus subtlety) in tastes be a critical currency of cultural capital, and what might be the underlying reasons?

We interviewed 28 women from upper and lower socio-economic classes in India to ascertain their cultural and symbolic capital resources and consumption preferences across sensory domains such as clothing, food, music, touch and smells. As evident through both LCC’s personal wardrobes and interactions with our prepared stimuli, clothing and accessories possessing elements of sheen, gloss, sequins, stones, glitter and light-reflecting mirror work were consistently preferred over the stimuli lacking these aesthetic elements. The women preferred big and bold gold-coloured costume jewellery adorned with rhinestones and gemstones over more subtle jewellery. Straight-cut designs were predominantly important criteria in selecting clothing, as was reflected in their clothing and accessory wardrobes. Straight-cut designs were predominantly preferred for both women and children. HCCs frequently described their clothing preferences as being “grand” or “rich,” including brightly coloured, flared, printed dresses for girls. There seemed to be an overarching desire to dress their children in a manner that immediately announces their presence to others.

In stark contrast, our HCCs preferred clothing and accessories strictly devoid of the same flamboyant elements that drew the interest of our LCC informants. For HCCs, comfort and fit were the most important criteria in selecting clothing, as was reflected in their clothing and accessory wardrobes. Straight-cut designs were predominantly preferred for both women and children. HCCs frequently described their clothing preferences as being “sober” and “simple,” with a conscious effort to not attract attention due to over-styled aesthetics. They preferred a minimalist aesthetic that allowed their presence to be demonstrated through their personalities rather than their clothing, similar to their home décor. Their clothes should be “nice” but not speak for them. For HCC consumers, dressing was seen as being integrally associated with portraying their upbringing, education, and higher cultural capital.

Sensory flamboyance or subtlety is proposed to be a unique currency of cultural capital in India, used to negotiate community membership. Bigger, gaudier clothing, strong scents, loud music, and spicy food are interpreted as part of an empowering strategy employed by a class largely deprived of social power and economic independence. Sensory flamboyance may also be a tangible way of embellishing life experiences for the otherwise economically impoverished, while further serving as a surrogate for the coveted real gold that remains a chimera. Subtlety as adopted by the upper classes is perhaps recognized, but there is no desire to emulate it. Our findings have important implications for targeted product design and marketing communications.

REFERENCES

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