Cultural Capital and Taste Distinctions in Urban India
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We revisit Holt’s (1998) dimensions of taste, as we study different consumption contexts among high and low cultural capital women in India. We suggest that differences in tastes and consumption can be understood through a modified framework of cultural capital, which takes into account hierarchy, empowerment, and economic capital.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

We revisit and reinterpret the interwoven relationship between cultural capital and consumption patterns (e.g., Bourdieu 1984; Holt 1998; Üstünner and Thompson 2012) in a dynamic, diverse and hierarchal society, and uncover the contextually important modifying role of empowerment. Bourdieu’s (1984) presents social life as a multidimensional status game in which people draw on three different resources – economic (financial resources), social (group affiliations and relationships), and cultural (distinctive tastes, skills and knowledge) capital, in a competition for status or symbolic capital (power). Different classes have different taste cultures and use different status consumption strategies that express and constitute their economic and cultural capital. Holt (1998) proposes modifications to Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital structured consumption in the American context, while Üstünner and Holt (2010) find the western model of status consumption inadequate to explain the nuances of distinctive consumption patterns in a less industrialized country like Turkey. Cultural capital and consumption has not been investigated in a hierarchical and culturally diverse society like India, where economic resources create stark differences in habitus across classes and castes, and society continues to be deeply patriarchal. With a similar goal to Holt (1998) and Üstünner and Holt (2010), we extend Bourdieu’s (1984) original analysis of taste and cultural capital by updating the framework to reflect important parameters in the modern Indian context. We suggest that differences in lifestyles, values, tastes and consumption can be understood through a modified framework of cultural capital that takes into account issues pertaining to differences in hierarchy, symbolic capital and gender inequalities.

We conduct ethnographic fieldwork documenting consumption preferences of 28 Indian women with different socioeconomic backgrounds in three different Indian cities. Women from patriarchal societies often occupy a lower position of power and status, resulting in lower symbolic capital, as compared to men (Sobh and Belk, 2011). The gender gap index, a measure of gender disparity developed by the World Economic Forum, finds India ranked 101 out of 136 countries, while the gender ratio stood at a mere 940 women per 1000 men in 2015 as a result of unbalanced female feticide. This discrepancy is likely to be accentuated among lower social classes (Bhattacharya and Belk, 2017), with education and empowerment of women continuing to be a challenge. As such we expect female disempowerment to be rooted in the habitus and be the biggest impediment to cultural capital acquisition, and consumption to be structured within these boundaries.

Empowerment emerges as the key factor interwoven with cultural capital among Indian women, with low cultural capital (LCC) informants being significantly disempowered both before and after marriage, and high cultural capital (HCC) informants being significantly more empowered through education and employment. LCCs, in contrast to HCCs, demonstrate lower powers of decision-making and higher subjugation to social and consumption norms imposed by their husbands’ families. Most of them had gotten married at young ages without even seeing their husbands before the wedding, many cutting short their dreams of higher education. Seemingly “empowering” strategies adopted by the LCCs were, on the contrary, from an etic perspective, least likely to be empowering in practice. For example, marriage was seen as an opportunity to climb the social ladder, with hypergamy (marriage above one’s social status) being a common objective for the LCCs. However, three informants who had married above their social standing were even more subjugated by their husbands’ families compared to the others. From mundane daily household decisions (such as what to cook) to deciding what clothes they could wear, to more significant decisions such as choosing a school for their children, all were decided by the husband and his family. Hypergamy was therefore not the panacea they may have hoped for, prior to marriage. Similarly, giving birth to more children- sons in particular- was erroneously seen as a means to improve their position in the social hierarchy. Ultimately children of the LCC women only become canvases for fulfilling their own aspirations with respect to education or freedom of expression.

Consistent with research suggesting that individuals suffering from low personal control have an increased belief in God (Laurin, Kay and Moscovitch 2008), our LCCs strongly believe that external powers control their destinies. Consequently they indulge in precautionary consumption such as stringent religious rituals, and using superstitious artifacts (that “ward off the evil eye,” for example). An important point of difference in tastes from Holt’s 1998 U.S. context is the role of consumption objects, which may have lost relevance in the less hierarchical and more anonymous American culture, but are still of paramount importance in this hierarchical society where material consumption marks a relatively easy way to convey one’s social standing and attain respect from other members of society (Vikas et al 2015). LCCs feel empowered by acquisition of such consumption objects- however, this objectified cultural capital does little to enhance their symbolic capital. While institutionalized cultural capital such as that acquired via education and employment would be truly empowering, lower class women are prevented from such acquisition by virtue of symbolic domination. In this sense they remain trapped in a quagmire of disempowerment (Belk and Ghoshal, 2017). Their identities are defined by their families and communities via taste conformation to the social norm, and they project their aspirations for more empowered identities onto their children. Meanwhile HCC women are empowered to define their individual identities through taste distinctions, and show proclivity towards acquisition of institutionalized cultural capital such as expertise in specialized domains.

In this research we offer the novel proposition that it is challenging for LCCs to build on their embodied cultural capital, primarily determined by their habitus, due to lack of empowerment. In this sense symbolic capital determines cultural capital, and symbolic domination determines taste, that conforms to community norms. We also find that while LCCs covet the acquisition of objectified cultural capital, and aspire to marry above their social standing, these do nothing to empower them. Only institutionalized forms of cultural capital such as education and employment would help them negotiate a higher position in the social strata continuum.

REFERENCES


