Ephemeral Consumerism: Crossing Territories of the Indian Female Body

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Few consumer studies focus on movement from rural to urban spheres as an ephemeral phenomenon. Using data gathered from young urban and rural women attending an all-girls college in New Delhi, we illustrate how bodily territoriality is acted out through consumption choices to be used as part of ‘territorial negotiation’.

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INTRODUCTION

The delicate, ephemeral boundaries that permeate everyday life in complex marketplaces presents consumers with both opportunity and threat. The understanding of ‘movement’ in this paper is not akin to the notion of migration, but looks to understand how the body, as an active, territorial agent (Smith et al., 2016) and carrier of cultural meaning, challenges the social structures embedded in patriarchal morality. Indeed, Smith et al. (2016) view the body’s mundane and extraordinary practices and experiences as simultaneously shoring up and tearing down territories and borders. However, it is important to remember social and economic histories imbued in places can be welcoming and embracing or aliening and exclusionary (Phillips and Robinson, 2015). In this vein, spaces and places serve to provide opportunity or threat – and at times, both. As the product of intersecting discourses, borders and territories serve to both limit and expand an individual’s epistemological vision (Agnew, 2008).

India’s relationship with women’s identity, their bodies and even their ownership is a complex one, varying from religious representations and embodiment through to sexual glorification offered through Bollywood films. Such relationships exist within a society undergoing rapid modernisation producing conflicting opinions about what constitutes a woman. It is within this contrasting relationships that we explore both rural and urban Indian women’s engagement with their bodies through adoption of western clothing and freedom to choose alternative forms of identity, within a wider context of a patriarchal society. Identities that may both be temporal or permanent created in one space or in multiple spaces but all within the constraints of a modernising society where patriarchal values dominate. Yet female engagement with western- or stigmatic-forms of consumption as ephemeral experiences, serve to temper bodily territoriality have been rarely discussed within the marketing literature.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In societies where the female body is held to be sacred (Agnew, 1997), engaging with the ‘modernity project’ through acts of consumption presents women with contrasting cultural values of tradition and modernity. Chatterjee (1989) argues that in societies like India, the female body is consumed through a material/spiritual dichotomy that manifests in the discourses of nationalistic modernity. Womanhood, then, is positioned through a prism of patriarchal moralities where the structures surrounding female conduct not only become embodied but also reconstituted through consumptive behaviour.

As noted by McClintock (1992) women in the social sphere are still deemed the atavistic and authentic ‘body’ of national traditions, simultaneously functioning as the living archive of the national archaic (Reuben, 1994). Effectively Indian women are juxtaposed between contrasting and opposing forces; revered and subjugated, worshiped and molested, free to express themselves in different domains, and yet voiceless (Olivelle, 1999, 2004). Within this ambivalence, modernity has created a sphere of empowerment through consumer culture, providing opportunities to challenge, subvert or re-negotiate societal patriarchy in a material world once reserved for men. Women become active agents and look to construct their own individual ‘body projects’ in light of the opportunities provided to them through the market. Within the fissure of self as individual and self as collective, women negotiate their physical and bodily territories through a complex interplay of differing cultural contrasts between the old, traditional (rural areas) and the new, modern (urban areas).

As both a cultural and social project (Delanty, 1999), modernity is not merely bound to a departure from tradition and faith to logic and scientific fact, but one which resides in the fluid, ouroboric state of society in being able to ingest and absorb those elements which serve to temper, challenge or contradict the status quo. Consumption choices account for new sociocultural patterns that have come to dominate urban lifestyles in emerging markets, highlighting how the “epistemological styles” (Appadurai, 1990) of life have shifted to incorporate the new and alien. This phenomenon highlights one of Giddens’ (1991) central critiques; societies with a social order based firmly in tradition would provide individuals with clearly defined roles, the post-traditional society requires individuals to carve out their roles and identities. In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on significance and it is now tradition, identity and society that consumption becomes a tool to showcase individual’s participation in the modernity project. Yet it is within these very roles that women challenge, perpetuate and reinforce on a daily basis whether it be cultural, religious or social. An enforcement that may be as voluntarily as it is involuntary.

Population movements from the rural to the urban offer many opportunities to engage with modernity, consumption symbolic of the urban modernity and adapting who we are. Within this Delanty (1999) notes the dualism of modernity as being both a cultural and social project, where the former focuses upon the autonomy of the subject (the self-assertion of the self, reflexivity), and the latter as a process of fragmentation (destruction of cultural foundations).

In sum, traditional forms supply support for, as well as against, change. It is within these forms, we argue, which prop up the properties of what is now deemed as a modernity unique and specific to those who are central to this research.

METHOD

Multi-method interpretive research data was collected over a three-month period at Bharati College, an all-female college in New Delhi, India. The college was selected due to its diverse student body (both urban and rural students) and access was negotiated through communication with the principal of the college and staff members of the English department. 23 young urban and rural women were selected, interviewed and observed. Observations facilitated the production of written ethnographic accounts and descriptions, where notes on the college site, city and the female researcher’s own experiences of navigating through the city were all documented. A mixture of focus groups and one-to-one interviews formed one source of data. Each interview lasted up to ninety minutes and interviews were conducted in both Hindi and English. Transcribed interviews were analyzed using Spiggle’s (1994) seven analytical stages. Reading and then re-reading the transcripts produced preliminary codes, with coded sheets annotated to identify comparisons, metaphors, and tropes (Meamber and Venkatesh, 2000). This produced several emergent themes, including ‘perceived superiority’, ‘discrimination and ridicule’ and ‘liberation’ and ‘morality’.

Through a projection technique, participants created posters and took photographs of their consumer experiences of a ‘modernising India’. Respondents were invited to talk through their photographs and posters and explain to the researcher the motivations for the im-

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ages taken and the explanations and rationale for the posters that were created.

Finally, the findings were considered with the literature providing a more informed understanding, whilst subjecting the findings to further empirical scrutiny.

**DISCUSSION**

The findings showed how participants considered the role of the body as central to negotiating both consumption activities and notions of modernity. Conclusions were drawn about the centrality of consumption for the young women in being able to forge alternative identities which have not been socially scripted. However, the attempts made at constructing this alternative (through rebellion, seeking loopholes and testing boundaries) was constrained through forms of control and surveillance from the familial and social spheres respectively, presenting an ongoing tug-of-war between traditional, social narratives of the conduct of women, and an individually ascribed notion. Women, as noted by Liddle and Joshi (1986) have been seen to be given new sets of possibilities which enable them to survive outside of the confines of a patriarchal structure, yet considering our findings, seems much less optimistic. The college became a site for territorial interactions that brought to the fore a form of superficial emancipation. It was the complex dialogical process through which bodily territories interacted that failed to present a clear binary between self and society, but further perpetuated patriarchal moralities as ascribed by the surrounding social structures. The findings support Lury’s (2001) notion that images and products follow a trajectory which encompasses the processes of undoing, destruction and construction. The opportunities and choices presented to the young women, particularly urban, of television programming, lifestyles, clothing, education and professions were ones which they were pleased to have access to, yet the adoption, appropriation and negotiation of these elements were still, to some degree, conducted within their respective territorialities mediated by the familial and social. Young urban women were relatively unperturbed by consuming elements of Western culture, yet their rural counterparts were comparatively sceptical and presented on numerous occasions a fear of loss.

The body was a site of risk and the girls were more than aware of this aspect and had tailored, where appropriate, not only their choice in clothing purchases but also their behaviour. There were numerous examples of where purchasing behaviour had come under scrutiny, however, at times much of this criticism had been self-imposed and demonstrated a deep-set understanding of territorial bargaining: Shivangini’s potential purchase of shorts, Deepika’s resistance to her father’s rule of not wearing jeans, Anya’s experience with the researcher in purchasing undergarments and jewellery, Baby’s discomfort in wearing jeans and make-up in a rural setting and Swati’s explanation of the rural bus journey to college and how dress deems one as ‘good’ or ‘bad’.

Swati, a rural participant, provides an apt example both fearing rejection from her village community for transcending the norms and expectations of her village and her fear of rejection from her urban peers in her college. This example raises many deep-set concerns. The threat of ‘transformation’ through ephemeral movements into new territories – the city and college. It is important to note that in light of this idea, the young women constructed identities through ‘structural realities’ (Deré, 2005) which were specifically embedded into the social and cultural fabric of India. Additionally, what the body could potentially be exposed to through engaging in the act of consumption at various sites had prompted an increased level of surveillance and control by parents, society and rural peer groups over the young women. This notion of the body is constructed heavily in the social realm, where the “significance of the body is determined ultimately by social structures which exist beyond the reach of individuals” (Shilling, 2006: 63), or in Goffman’s (1963) words, the meanings attributed to the body are “determined by shared vocabularies of the body idiom which are not under the immediate control of individuals” (p.35). Ultimately, what the young women become are territorial agents, where the dynamic of place and space serve to temper a multi-faceted bodily territoriality that becomes negotiated through ephemeral boundary-crossing.

Despite this, it would be false to assume that resistance to these social dictates did not exist in the village setting nor amongst rural girls. There were elements of resistance where stories of rural girls changing into jeans whilst on the college campus were numerous. The college campus became a haven for consumption of the unfamiliar, immoral and Western, in addition to being a place where the body could be showcased. Several commentators have noted that the increasing influence of consumer cultures have imposed an individualising effect on citizens-turned-consumers (Bauman, 2005; Du Gay, 1996). Binckley (2009:25) asserts that “consumer cultures impose an individualising, reflexive or narcissistic orientation on individuals who become self-enterprising, self-governing and disembedded from collective, shared contexts”. What seems to be apparent from this definition of consumer culture is that it is an inherently Western notion of the term. There seems to be little acknowledgement for the term ‘culture’ within the assessment and it pushes to turn a complex phenomenon into a distinct binary where consumer and culture are placed at opposite ends. Although there may be some element of truth in Bauman’s (2005:30) assertion that “there is no such thing as collective consumption”, the findings present consumption as a social process in that it relates to a continuous expression of territories through a continuous cycle of negotiation and re-negotiation which is prompted by a collective form of moral policing.

Through the urban girls’ rejection of their college and its associated ‘backward’ connotations, the college environment had significantly restricted their ability to fully explore their lifestyles/tastes and meant that much of their frustration fell upon the shoulders of the majority, rural student body. This group was subsequently sidelined and at times mocked by the urban crowd for their ‘backward’ dress, lack of fluency in English, body language, lack of exposure to the ‘foreign’ and overall lack of drive and professional ambition. In other words, the girls were seen to lack in all attributes associated with a modern, cosmopolitan notion of an Indian woman, as defined by the young women themselves.

The ‘self’ emerged as an ontological dilemma where the preoccupation with the ‘self’ was looked down upon by rural respondents who felt that the loss of collectivity would result in a loss of tradition. The self in terms of grooming and maintaining trends was a project of necessity for the urban respondents; the rural girls on the other hand critiqued this expression of self-indulgence as unnecessary, especially before marriage. Control and surveillance were of particular importance as they operated as mechanisms to curb and control not only women as their physical selves, but formed to protect the ‘morality’ of the nation. Ultimately, as material and discursive sites where tradition is performed (Oza, 2001), the body posed many expectations of her village and her fear of rejection from her urban peers in her college. This example raises many deep-set concerns. The threat of ‘transformation’ through ephemeral movements into new territories – the city and college. It is important to note that in light of this idea, the young women constructed identities through ‘structural realities’ (Deré, 2005) which were specifically embedded into the social and cultural fabric of India. Additionally, what the body could potentially be exposed to through engaging in the act of consumption at various sites had prompted an increased level of surveillance and control by parents, society and rural peer groups over

**CONCLUSION**

Our paper explored the often conflict issues surrounding territorial bodies and how they are constructed, presented, and displayed...
within an all-female territory. Somers (1994) explanation of stories and narrative as an ‘ontological condition’ provides an apt conclusion here. Somers places authority back into the hands of the respondents; being able to develop an intricate understanding of the ways in which this group of consumers are able to construct a multiplicity of identities, through skilful cultural navigation, was at the heart of this study. The process of ‘making sense’ and the ways in which the young women were guided through ‘social, public and cultural narratives’ whilst negotiating their own sense of selves are of central importance in developing a rich understanding of consumption behaviour amongst this group of respondents. Above all, this paper, simply put, is about experiences and not solutions; it is about presenting to the reader the sorts of questions that force a renegotiation of Western theoretical perspectives and where some theoretical assumptions could not lie further from the realities of lived consumer experiences in the East.

REFERENCES