

A TRANSGENDER CONSUMER CULTURE IN TAMIL NADU: OBSERVATORY STUDY

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Abstract

Ethnic minorities, Transgender, and other socially disenfranchised groups are difficult to study. The position of members of a modern consumer society is largely denied to stigmatized social groups, making this a very pertinent topic in the study of consumer behavior (Barbosa, 2006). The purpose of this work is to shed light on the ways in which transgender in Tamil Nadu, India construct and uphold the hierarchical and metaphorical barriers between the Transgender and heterosexual worlds, as well as to investigate the role that consumption plays in boundary setting. Along with 40 semi-structured interviews with Transgender individuals, ethnographic observation of a group of Transgender was done. The findings imply that (a) the significance of transgender places of consumption ranges from profane to sacred throughout their lives; and (b) in the transgender world, the body is seen as both a cultural construction and as a physical object.

Keywords: Transgender, Heterosexual, Consumer Culture.

INTRODUCTION

Everyday tasks have a specific symbolic structure that gives them purpose and significance. We take care of our own food and clothing, and we enjoy ourselves by acting in accordance with a symbolic system that directs us in such things as when what, and how to eat. The assets, services, goods, and experiences can be thought of as the foundation on which culture is formed, and these schemes are a part of the culture. The lenses through which all things are perceived, comprehended, interpreted, and assimilated can thus be described as culture (McCracken, 2003). The human activity action plan establishes the parameters of social action, defining the actions and products that result from them. The ideals that emerge from a people's way of life are what make up its culture. These values provide individuals with a framework and direction for what is good or terrible, true, or false, and what is life or art (Slater, 2002). The world is given various meanings through culture, which can be divided into cultural categories and principles. Even so, culture is not entirely hegemonic. Some people and communities can interpret, transform, oppose, and alter previously established cultural norms. Consumption has the potential to be an effective tool for both establishing dominant social patterns and, at the same time (though seldom in the same manner), resisting and changing these same cultural traditions. Consumption is not viewed in this study as being passive in the face of external cultural influences that shape culture (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

It is challenging to research the consumer behaviour of socially excluded groups including LGBT people, members of racial or ethnic minorities, people who live in slums, drug users, and others. However, initiatives pertaining to such knowledge are

crucial in the fields of management studies generally and consumer behaviour specifically. According to Barbosa (2006, p. 8), "some social groupings, such, for example, ethnic minorities, are effectively denied the status of members of a modern consumer society." Most of the research on socially excluded groups, in the author's opinion, primarily focuses on these groups as marginalised, discriminated minorities, while ignoring other factors such as their roles and identities as consumers. Since people communicate and construct themselves through the meanings attached to their belongings, consumption is also a crucial factor in understanding how people come to be who they are (Belk, 1988). While using their possessions to examine how consumers are created or how they express their various identities, we started to consider whether such possessions could be seen as a discourse, since consumption of what we perceive as being ours involves a human action in relation to someone (oneself or someone else), in a specific interactional context. "Every discourse comes from someone with specific identification markers that explain where he belongs in social life and uniquely situate him, as well as those he speaks to, in his discourse," claims Lopes (2003, p. 19). For example, a black catholic married heterosexual woman from So Paulo, a white male gay from Boston, etc., use their things to express who they are, not just as users but as discursively competent people. Therefore, a person's possessions reveal who they are, to which groups they belong, as well as the roles they play within these groups and in connection to society at large.

This research aims to comprehend how a particular category of transgender people use the discourse surrounding their possessions to create and preserve the hierarchical and symbolic boundaries between the third gender and straight worlds, and to investigate the role that consumption plays in boundary setting. Here, the "world" we refer to is the pre-existing symbolic world in which these people reside.

Theoretical Framework

The area of symbolic violence in society is explored in French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's (1977a, 1977b, 1984, 1989, 2003) work on power and domination. According to Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence (Bourdieu 1972, 18, cited in Tiercelin & Remy, 2019), it is "any force that succeeds to impose meanings and impose them by masking the power imbalance that underlying its strength." Bourdieu aims to clarify how underlying power connections in social systems, which conceal how some groups within society, become marginalised, preserve hierarchies and inequalities. In his writings, Bourdieu investigates "why many kinds of dominance continue with very few challengers" (Chambers 2005, 327). Bourdieu's theories have been widely embraced in consumer cultural work to examine how social hierarchies and inequalities are reproduced (Allen, 2002; Holt, 1998).

Researchers can now examine the gendered character of status distinctions thanks to Bourdieu's theories on dominance and power. The omnipotence of gender in all social interactions is axiomatic, as much feminist research has demonstrated (Krais, 2006). Bourdieu does not pay much attention to the connection between gender and capital, and in particular, the ways that gender itself may be a kind of capital (Thorpe, 2009). Bourdieu's conception of gender as a type of capital is ambiguous since it reproduces old binary distinctions between the public (economic) and private (cultural, domestic) spheres of masculinity and femininity in the division of labour between men and women (Skeggs, 2004). He does, however, believe that gender is a construct that is

embodied in an individual's habitus and that results in a gendered perspective on the world.

Symbolic violence, also known as symbolic power (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017), is the phrase used to describe the lived experiences and feelings of stigmatisation, devaluation, and illegitimacy of socially excluded groups. In addition to the subjective experience of the individual, where they self-blame or self-police to resist symbolic domination, these sentiments of anxiety, embarrassment, humiliation, and so forth, have an impact on the person. For instance, Lumsden and Morgan (2018) explain how trolling and silencing on social media platforms contribute to symbolic violence occurring in online settings. The writers also stress the significance of victims' responses to their harassers in addition to symbolic acts of violence.

In his discussion of symbolic violence, Bourdieu uses examples from daily life to demonstrate how misrecognition causes symbolic violence to go unchecked. Through specific discourses, behaviours, and policies, "practices that would typically be viewed as problematic or 'violent' eventually achieve social approval" (Thapar-Björkert et al., 2016, 149). This is known as the misrecognition of symbolic violence. Acts of misrecognition, according to Bourdieu (1996, 199), are under "the controls of consciousness and will." People who experience symbolic violence may not perceive it as an act of dominance because power relations are concealed, and as a result, they unintentionally perpetuate the dominant norms and values through their social interactions. According to Bourdieu (1996, 199), "cognitive battles" that challenge the unarguable and "bring the undiscussed into the discussion, the unformulated into formulation" are always possible (Bourdieu, 1994, 164). An excellent illustration is Vikas et al. (2015) analysis of how subordinates can counteract the elite's symbolic violence after a marketization process that calls into doubt the value of pre-existing dispositions. But because gender ideas are strongly ingrained, they frequently conflict with the realities of modern culture (McNay, 1999). The continuance of symbolic violence for same-sex couples within the wedding industry is revealed by Velagaleti's (2017) dissertation research, which examines the impact of social change on consumer legitimacy.

The Experiences of Transgender Customers

Few consumer studies have focused on transgender and gender-nonconforming identities. However, Kraus (2006) reminds us that "doing gender," as articulated by West and Zimmerman (1987), is not universal but rather "variations on a theme," and that much of the consumer research on gender has concentrated on the experiences of primarily white, middle-class groups. The social construction of masculinity and femininity, as well as how the body is interpreted and defined through gender expressions, all influence how a person experiences gender and help to determine whether they identify as being either masculine or feminine. Furthermore, sexuality and gender are frequently considered to be the same thing. On gender for its underlying principles, their ongoing connections in the study literature point to stereotyped depictions of sexuality and gender (Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998, 174). The consistent categorisation of the heterosexual and gay populations is required by the normative categories of the gender of the homosexual individual and the gender of the person or people they are drawn to 2019 (Holleb). Many studies have a cis heteronormative focus, which indicates that they pay little to no attention to consideration given to non-normative identities.

Another factor contributing to the lack of attention paid to transgender consumers is the propensity to refer to the identities covered by the LGBTQ+ acronym rather than the fragmented, intersecting variety that exists. Martin et al (2021)'s investigation of the intersection of commercial and symbolic violence in how the tobacco industry has historically targeted the LGBTQ community is one study that uses this methodology and is relevant to the current topic. Martin et al. (2021, 69) define market violence as "actions and narratives of powerful market actors that perpetuate inequalities and/or inequities on less powerful market actors." This is frequently done by manipulating the market relationships that exist between consumers and producers. In settings of consumption, the illegitimacy created by dominating systems is represented in a lack of items that specifically address the needs of specific populations, limited product offerings, and restricted access to products (Velagaleti, 2017). These elements may lead to feelings of vulnerability and worry, which have a detrimental effect on the well-being of customers. Ruvio and Belk (2018, 108) discuss the identity conflicts that trans people face when they are forced to create two gender identities one that they live out openly as their socially acceptable gender identity and the other that they live out in secret with possessions they consider to be "forbidden fruit."

METHODOLOGY

In this study, we use a constructionist viewpoint, according to which the social world's meanings are shaped by human interaction and altered as a result of historical and cultural development (Berger & Luckmann, 2004). According to this viewpoint, it is vital to comprehend the meanings that make up this real world in order to comprehend reality. Therefore, the researcher must explain how meanings are created and how those meanings fit into the discourses and practices of the actors and groups being studied (Schau, 1998).

One of the most notable aspects of ethnography is the researcher's integration into the reality of the group being studied so that they may observe the phenomenon first-hand. The propensity to deal with data that has not been previously coded as a closed set of analytical categories is another trait. The anthropological journey is based on the presumption that understanding the meanings of social acts should be based on the perspectives of the individuals themselves and not on the researcher's, according to DaMatta (1978, p. 35). This refers to research a topic from the perspective of someone else, in this example, the transgender community in Tamil Nadu. Along with the ethnographic approach, we also conducted interviews with 40 transgender people using a semi-structured script (McCraken, 1988). We employed the snowball sampling method to choose the participants, in which an informant asks one of his friends to participate, who then asks another friend, and so on. In their research on homosexual communities, Kates (1998) and Troiden (1989) employed this technique.

FINDINGS

Transgender consumer spaces: from the profane to the sacred

The first time a transgender person visited a place like a bar, nightclub, or beach was typically a turning point in their acceptance of their transsexual identity, as several informants vividly and revealingly recalled.

When he was 17 years old, Swetha's (36) account of the time she had to choose whether to visit a transgender community hall is particularly instructive:

"I had no prior knowledge of the trans community. One day, as my buddy and I were leaving a party, she observed, "Look, there's a transsexual person close to the temple." That was it! I kept thinking that if I stepped inside after she pressed the alarm button, there would be no turning back. I later returned and twice stood outside the transsexual community centre, but I refrained from entering. I was simply amazed on the day I made the decision to enter. I did not expect what I was seeing in front of me. It was not obnoxious or distasteful. Every aspect was average and lovely.

In Swetha's statement, it is very evident how attending a transgender community hall contributed to the initiation of his transsexual identification. She even used the term "alarm" to emphasize how dangerous the choice was. In this regard, a trans-oriented retail environment was initially perceived by many informants as a profane setting, a location of vice and temptation. Going to such venues meant, in the eyes of many informants, accepting immorality, demonstrating disrespect for their families, and demonstrating disrespect for society. Throughout the course of the study, we noticed that these settings allowed the informants to completely feel what it was like to be a transgender person, to be a part of a community of equals, and to participate in activities with other Tran's people.

Swetha was taken aback when she noticed that the area was not pornographic or obscene. In actuality, what he saw were Trans people socializing, gatherings of friends, and, most importantly, a space where she could be herself:

"Visually, the transgender community hall was completely different from what I had pictured my entire life — it was a normal place. Everything was so thrilling. What drew me in was "the difference." I could dance however; I wanted and look at anybody I wanted without worry since I was completely myself there. Then I started going there on the weekends to meet people"

This claim demonstrates how Swetha's preconceived notions about community halls were disproved once he visited one and found it to be a typical setting. In addition to being abnormal, it was also unique; in a contrast to the heterosexual society she was familiar with, it was a setting where he could be genuine and unrestricted. At least she wouldn't feel socially inferior and stigmatized there. Numerous examples in our field notes highlight these two occasions—before and after visiting a homosexual bar or nightclub as unique consumption experiences that had a significant impact on the informants' life (Arnould & Price, 1993).

Consuming and Ingesting

New meanings, attitudes, and even new preconceptions about the LGBT community are acquired through the socialisation and cultural integration processes that this research has revealed. A key role in this process is played by consumption. The person must learn to read and write since it is almost like following a path and having a text to refer to (McCraken, 2003). In other ways, it is like a new beginning because some informants claimed they had to learn everything from scratch. This process resembles a period of transition, a rite of passage, where the person gives up a pre-existing status the heterosexual identity in order to create his transsexual identity. Informants now acquire the language necessary to discuss the boundary separating the heterosexual and LGBT communities.

Most respondents claimed to have gone through the self-concept transformation that was described. While the informants first gave descriptions of themselves that conjured up an image, they thereafter perceived themselves as new people, reflecting on a reality that was not their own. In the eyes of their peers, they can recognize and see themselves. Only when there is a gay identity. A global affiliation takes place (Cass, 1984; Haslop et al., 1998). Clearly, respondents dress to establish a symbolic barrier between the gay and straight communities in addition to displaying their transsexuality also the heterosexual world. The respondent's self-image did significantly improve after accepting their sexual orientation, but there was also a lot of pressure on them to conform to the body-conscious aesthetic norms of the LGBT community.

A Cultural Paradigm

In the discourses of the respondents, the intense aesthetic pressure that was placed on the persons when they entered transsexuality was frequently discussed. Numerous informants were forced to recreate and play with their own bodies as a result of this aesthetic pressure. The body experience is a way to socially declare, "This is where I reside," which is compatible with Giddens' (2002, p. 76) idea of the body as a means of creating a singular and integrated self.

The following comment reflects how the respondents defined the body as something they have that may and must be altered in order to conform to the standards of a different culture:

"I believe acceptance is a problem. Everyone there needs to accept you. Everybody was working out and using steroids. They would all then say, "Go ahead, take them." I'd follow suit and mimic what works! So, I joined vanity's madness. I had liposuction, including stomach liposuction, joined a gym, took up swimming, and started using anabolic steroids, which caused me to gain weight rapidly (Naleena, 25).

The right techniques to cover this body, which is revered in Tran's culture and the aesthetic consumption of the body, are clearly related. We found during the survey that Tran's people are highly worried about purchasing clothing that reveals the feminine body type.

"The clothing for transgender women is fashionable, fitted, and contours the body. Here we have the worship of the body, the vanity of being in shape so you can flaunt it, so you can look good [...] because trans prefer good brands, they like to dress well, and they are quite vain" (Prathisha, 35). As a result, anything that covers the body must also improve this contour, which, as many sources quipped, starts to have. It contributes to theory in various ways to examine transgender consumer experiences through the lens of symbolic violence. In order to understand how power in gender relations emerges at the macro, meso, and micro levels, Steinfield et al (2019)'s study of the reproductive market in Uganda is useful on small scales. By straying from the rigid and ingrained gender binary, we here supplement their attention on the power imbalances between men's and women's positions in the social hierarchy. Our research showed that, for Tran's consumers, symbolic violence functions at social, interpersonal, and individual levels and aids in bringing to light gender inequities that could otherwise go unnoticed. The consumer vulnerability viewpoint, which has previously been employed as a theoretical framework to explain transgender consumers' experiences, is productively informed by, and integrated with the lens of

symbolic violence (McKeage et al., 2017). "A state of powerlessness" is a simple definition of consumer vulnerability (Baker et al. 2005, 134).

We have embraced a Bourdieu viewpoint on symbolic violence, which centralizes power dynamics and disparities. This suggests a theoretical compatibility that has gone mostly unnoticed in earlier research, which may help explain how consumers react to gender inequalities. The results highlight a paradox since, despite the fact that passive reactions are meant to reduce emotional pain, they often increase it. The difficulties between complying with cisgender hegemony and leading a "genuine" existence by freely rejecting or bending binary gender expressions have been demonstrated for Trans persons by Thompson (2015). The implication is that these conflicts have a negative impact on the welfare of transgender customers. The participants' welfare suffers as they control their behavior and look to conform to social gender norms, which has a detrimental impact on their ability to completely express themselves or talk about important matters with family members.

CONCLUSION

This study also raises policy concerns by identifying the role that the market may play in both allowing and limiting symbolic violence. The equal rights and just treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals as a group are frequently the focus of policymakers. While acknowledging the improvements made and the significance of such regulation, treating LGBTQ+ customers collectively suggests that they are a homogeneous set of customers. The research given in this article shows that Trans people experience things that are unique to their gender identity and that not everyone in the LGBTQ+ community does. The research shows that while some Trans consumers misrecognize the idea of "passing" as cis as symbolic violence, others engage in more overt resistance against cis dominance. A heterogeneous LGBT+ community can become tense as a result of these responses with confrontations feeling painful. This shows that the typical inclination to lump all LGBTQ+ experiences together does not fully convey the complexity of Trans experiences. There is potential for media about the complexities of LGBTQ+ lives to develop beyond dated tropes and provide "moments of recognition" (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2013, 37) that lend legitimacy to lives and experiences by seizing opportunities to tell stories that reflect "polyvocal realities" (Coleman, 2015, 52).

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