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## **“From caged birds to women with wings”: A perspective on consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** We explore consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women to explicate how they are challenging traditional social norms and redefining their identity through their consumption practices.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** A total of thirty-two semi-structured and photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with new middle-class women between the age group of 23-40 years in India.

**Findings:** We illustrate how the doing of consumption practices that involves creating, controlling, knowing and transforming is enabling new middle-class Indian women to undo gender disparities embedded in hegemonic patriarchal social order. We provide new insights into how class, symbolic capital intersect gender to redefine middle-class women’s feminine self.

**Research Limitation/Implications:** We specifically illustrate how new middle-class Indian women are using consumption practices to uplift their position in household, bring about new modes of social interface, identity expression and a reversal in gender roles.

**Practical Implications:** The conflation of women’s independence with consumerism underlines the need for marketers to position consumer goods in a manner that strengthen women’s self and alleviate cultural perceptions of women as subordinate to men in the household. Indian market has considerable growth potential for publicly visible brands that affirm the elevated social status of women and allow them to effectively demonstrate their capital resources.

**Originality/Value:** We explore an under-researched consumer segment by focusing particularly the intersection of discourses of women’s individuality with that of their consumption practices. Additionally, our pioneering use of photo-elicitation technique coupled with our hermeneutic approach enables us to elicit effectively women’s reflections on their behaviours, values and motivations underlying their consumption practices.

**Keywords:** Photo-elicitation, gender, inequality, women consumers, post-feminism

**Article Type:** Research Paper

## Introduction

The rapid growth of the Indian economy over the past two decades has led to a substantial expansion of India's new middle-class consumers characterised by higher female workforce participation (Javalgi and Grossman, 2016; Kharas, 2017). It is to be noted that the 'newness' of the Indian middle-class stems from the benefits of neoliberal economic policies that have created better job opportunities and an easy accessibility to western goods (Brosius, 2010; Fernandes, 2006). As opposed to traditional middle-class that preferred public sector jobs on a modest income, the new middle-class is opting for private sector careers with multinational firms that offer better income. Thus, an increasing number of Indian women in urban areas, constituting around 25 % of total organised workforce and a part and parcel of India's new middle-class, are now able to engage in high levels of consumption (Shenoy-Packer, 2014; Venkatesh et al., 2013). This shift in women's consumption practices is encapsulated in discourse on post-feminism that engages with the contemporary context of neo-liberal, late-capitalist society characterised by consumer culture and rise in individualism that is contributing to women's enhanced status within their households (Brooks, 1997).

Given the foregoing, we set out to identify consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women and understand how these practices are empowering their status within their household. In so doing, we also respond to authors' calls (see Eckhardt and Dholakia, 2013; Jafari et al., 2012) underlining a need to introduce new methodological perspectives to grasp the nuances of consumer behaviour in emerging markets. We build on post-feminism literature and Butler's (2004) theoretical perspective to understand how consumption practices is empowering women and enabling them to redefine their identity. We argue that rather than considering gender as a socially constructed product, it should be understood as doings or actions people do (West and Zimmerman, 1987). If gender can be done, it can also be undone by *performing the other* or enacting the gender roles in different than usual way (Butler, 2004; Seregina, 2019). The undoing of gender enables individuals to challenge the existing gender inequities. Thus, when we understand gender through the perspective of women's consumption practices, it allows us to comprehend how new middle-class Indian women are *undoing* gender by escaping repressive consumerist norms and embracing a life of free agency (Joy et al., 2015). Accordingly, we explore two research questions: how have concomitant economic and structural changes affected a shift in the consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women? How these emerging consumption practices are enabling the remaking of a thriving (i.e., self-determining) gendered identity? In what follows, we identify gaps in extant research on Indian women's consumption practices and adopt a post-feminist lens to bridge these gaps and offer new insights through our work. Next, we present a critical review of methodological approaches underpinning the research study. The subsequent sections provide an analysis of how women use their consumption

practices to resist the prevalent social norms. The study concludes with a reflection on implications arising from a change in women's consumption practices vis-à-vis the broader socioeconomic structures in which they are embedded.

### **Post-feminism and new middle-class Indian women consumers: a critical review of research**

The notion of Indian women's respectability has been defined primarily by signs of matrimony and domestic bliss resulting until recently in societal stigma attached to educated women's employment (Radhakrishnan, 2007). Indeed, "*many of the contemporary debates about gender in India reflect aspects of the older, centuries' long struggle over the women question*" (Purkayastha et al., 2003, p. 505). Mainly, these are shaped by patriarchy, bureaucracy and corruption, class and caste dominance and social order plus inadequate infrastructure that continue to impede the economic growth of marginal women from weaker sections of society (Belk and Ghoshal, 2017).

The introduction of neo-liberal economic policies in 1990s, proliferation of transnational media and structural changes in the society led to a rise in new middle-class comprising of burgeoning female workforce (Mankekar, 2013, Mathur, 2014). This development has consequently brought key ideological transitions within the Indian middle-class whereby women's work also contributes to their sense of autonomy, prestige and decision-making and these attributes manifest in their consumption patterns (Donner, 2011; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). The new work culture and spatial shopping malls are the sites of new consumerism that articulate the rise of new middle-class women as the targets of consumer goods that facilitate their upward social mobility and augment their sense of self and well-being of their families (Brosius, 2010; Srivastava, 2014). Contemporary Indian films, advertisements, features are also shaping the aspirations of women by depicting them as independent and unfettered by traditions and their matrimonial status (Mankekar, 2013). These images bear the hallmark of post-feminism (Gowrisankar and Ajit, 2016) that not only emphasises an obliteration of women's stereotypical roles, but also celebrates their 'real beauty' evident in Dabur Vatika's hair oil advertisement which includes the story of a bald cancer survivor. Within the patriarchal context of India, where women consumers seldom assumed the role of a decision-maker and lacked spending power, we adopt a post-feminist stance which embodies a compromise with, and a celebration of, consumer culture, marking a stark shift from anti-consumerist feminist activism (Catterall et al., 2006).

However, we take a critical view of this celebratory stance to illustrate that women's experiences vary and that consumption-oriented culture may render them vulnerable to sexist imagery. The notion of women's independence realised through their consumption practices is problematic as it is premised on their participation in the system of global capitalism, as opposed to being allied with feminist epistemologies of

parity (Cole and Crossley, 2009). Indeed, consumer goods, whilst conferring independence, can also objectify women's bodies (de Grazia and Furlough 1996; Gökariksel and McLarney, 2010). Instead, we engage with the post-feminist discourse that revels in the realisation of women's mindful consumption aimed at improving family circumstances and their economic prowess in the marketplace (Genz, 2006). Our focus on 'women of colour feminism' (see Spivak, 1999) or what Murray (1997) calls "*a non-hegemonic feminism capable of giving voice to local, indigenous and post-colonial feminisms*" (p. 39) helps us to examine new middle-class subjectivities that allow women self-fashioning and an acquisition of distinct identity akin to marketing imagery and labels displayed on products.

Prior consumer research in Asian and other contexts underlines the need to recognise that gender intersects with other categories of identity such as class and sexuality implying that women's experiences may vary greatly, and thus the construct 'woman' is not uniform, even though women may encounter some degree of sexism in patriarchal societies (Gaetano, 2016; McFadden, 2003; Thornham and Pengpeng, 2010). For example, Ganguly-Scrase (2003) examines lower middle-class Indian working-women in globalising India to show how liberalised economy has enabled them greater autonomy and increased access to household goods. Yet, their experiences are quite different to call-centre women employees who impersonate foreign languages, discourses and lifestyles to gain upward social mobility and recreate new identities (Mankekar, 2013). Similarly, Pandey (2014) illustrates the effects of globalisation on consumer agency of urban middle-class Indian working-women by describing how new places of work and spaces of consumption are allowing them to redefine their identity away from a powerful male gaze to a self-regulating narcissistic individualistic gaze. Üstüner and Holt's (2007) ethnographic study discusses how Turkish squatter women invest their dreams in the pursuit of Batici lifestyle to create a new female identity distinct from their mothers. Overall, this brief review of extant research suggests that although new generation females are trying to become more empowered than their parents, the ownership of sufficient symbolic capital ultimately acts as a decisive factor in redefining their identity (Mankekar, 2013; Üstüner and Holt, 2007). The presence of symbolic capital affords them with the legitimate base for acquiring respect, power and status (Üstüner and Thompson, 2012).

Despite these developments, extant research on Indian women's purchase behaviour has taken a narrow perspective by limiting the middle-class status to just consumerism and not adequately addressing how women's aspirations sustained by their symbolic capital enables them to enhance their position and escape the state of precarity in globally connected and increasingly consumerist Indian economy. Our contribution to the debate differs from previous studies in two significant ways. First, we examine new middle-class Indian women, who unlike the women in prior studies, are advantaged with various forms of symbolic capital (economic, social and cultural) embodied in their status, competencies and greater mobility that has

allowed them to transgress caste, class and religious precincts (Mankekar, 2013; Pandey, 2014). Their increasing liberal discourse around marriage practices is resulting in social reproduction and new identities (Donner, 2011). The shift is also evident in their routine practices such as dining (Mish, 2007), frequent purchase of fashion clothing and cosmetics (Ajitha and Sivakumar, 2017; Bhatnagar, 2015; Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Khare et al., 2012), an enhanced interest in financial products such as home loans, car insurance (Paluri and Mehra, 2016) plus a surge in online shopping (Arora and Aggarwal, 2018).

Second, we explore how these routine consumption practices are helping them to impersonate a new lifestyle to engage in broader discourses of upward social mobility and identity that are resulting in an *undoing* of gender roles. We argue that in their attempt to be someone else, they emulate their idealised image of growth that is resulting in blurring of gender roles (Mankekar, 2013). There is a need to examine the fluidity of such gendered identity with an emphasis on how gender is continuously redefined in everyday practices (Poggio, 2006). Following Butler (2004), we consider gender as a doing centred on reiteration or what West and Zimmerman (1987) term as “*routine, methodical and recurring accomplishment*” (p. 126). Butler (2004) suggests that the *doing of gender* can also enable us to understand the *undoing of gender*. The main method of undoing gender is by *performing the other* or by enacting the gender roles in an alternative way than it is usually done (Butler, 2004; Poggio, 2006; Seregina, 2019). We build on post-feminism literature and Butler’s theoretical perspective to examine how routine consumption practices are enabling new middle-class women to resist gender disparities and construct new feminine identity by *performing the other* or enacting gender roles in an alternative way (Butler, 2004; Poggio, 2006; Seregina, 2019).

The post-feminist turn, positioned at the intersection between post-modernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, is concerned with reconceptualising identity by rejecting essentialist notions around fixed, universal categories such as gender (Lotz, 2001). The paradigm is particularly suited to study women consumers as it affords them agency by arguing against binary divisions and considering self as a ludic element that can be realised and empowered through the marketplace offerings (Catterall et al., 2006; Van Bauwel, 2004). Extant research has used post-feminist perspective to examine market’s empowering role in redefining women’s identity (Arthurs, 2003; Gill and Scharff, 2011). Our study fills a key gap as these studies lack an engagement with experiences of women from traditional socio-cultural contexts such as India wherein they have faced discrimination because of fixed gender roles, but are now undoing gender through their spending power and making use of marketplace offerings to redefine their identities in multifaceted ways.

## **Method**

We reasoned the use of semi-structured and photo-elicitation interviews is most suited to capture the multifaceted relationship between new middle-class women's consumption practices and their constitution of new forms of sub-cultural subjectivities and identities embodied by post-feminist capitalism (Belk, 2013; Eckhardt and Bengtsson, 2010). A total of 32 face-to-face interviews were conducted with an emphasis on giving women (between the ages of 23-40) complete freedom to determine the pace of the interview process, consistent with the feminist approach to diminish power imbalances between researchers and participants (Dobscha and Ozanne, 2001). The research was carried out in *Udaipur* because studying middle-class as a whole in a diverse country like India can lead to generalised assumptions about their consumption behaviour (Kardes, 2016). The selection of *Udaipur* makes sense because it is fast transforming into global city by drawing investment from multinational banks, companies, luxury hotels and real estate. It has also been conferred the status of a smart city under the Government of India's urban renewal programme designed to develop 100 cities across the country as citizen-friendly and sustainable. The conceptual definition of new middle-class as provided by authors (see Brosius, 2010; Fernandes, 2006) guided us in recruiting the participants. We purposively selected urban women who conversed in English, had either a university degree or professional qualification and who were employed in private companies. Our participants represented different demographic profile such as professions, income, age, marital status and religion that provided holistic perspective about new middle-class women's consumption practices.

Additionally, we used an auto-driving photo-elicitation method where participants were asked to take three pictures of consumer objects which they had purchased after starting their career. This helped in minimising sensitivity and socio-cultural biases attached to taking any photographs by researcher (Noland, 2006). Photographs acted as important projective stimuli for starting the conversation and revealing deeper aspects of women's consumption practices (Heisley and Levy, 1991). The number of photographs was restricted to three because it was found in the pilot test that talking about fewer pictures resulted in productive interface with participants (Heisley and Levy, 1991). The photographs, selected in order of participants' priority of significance, formed the basis of conversation. However, we do acknowledge the constraint on the aggregate of visual stimuli used in the paper. Thus, a combination of semi-structured interviews followed by photo-elicitation facilitated in building rapport and women participants themselves took to the research territory to provide information which they might have been hesitant to share (Heisley and Levy, 1991). All interviews were conducted in English and the transcribed data were analysed using NVivo 12. The analysis of photographs began with the interpretation of pictures by participants during the interview process itself.

## **Findings**

Drawing upon the scholarly work of Belk (1988), Cheetham and McEachern (2013) and Sartre (1969), we identify consumption practices of women and exemplify how the *doing* of seemingly simple act of consumption is enabling them to undo gender and engage in acts of rational planning and self-assertion that have long been coded as masculine. We rely on few significant stories to summarise and narrate the experiences of women through the help of photographs and interview excerpts. The pictures and quotes are presented with pseudonyms and with the consent of participants.

### *Creating a space for redefined identity*

Creating entails making of a good by an act of purchase and imbuing it particular attributes women desire that results in their redefining of self (Belk, 1988). The act of *creating* extends women's self because it provides them enormous possibilities to fulfil their consumer desires that shape their post-feminist subjectivities. Rashi, a 27-year-old single woman, is working as a teacher in a private school. She proclaims in glee while showing the picture (*see figure 1*) of a Burberry perfume which she purchased from a multinational beauty retail store *Sephora*:

*“Just the happiness of buying Burberry is connected to my independence. I don't need a boyfriend or husband to buy Burberry for me. . . . See, I also got this Prada lotion as a complementary gift”.*

The photograph evinces how Burberry perfume is a symbol of global consumerism that is allowing Rashi to contest new-middle class identity and provide a face to her desires and pleasures. This situation is parallel to post-feminist ideology where women seek empowerment through consumer culture (Catterall et al., 2006). The knowledge about Burberry and its new place of consumption (*Sephora*) allows Rashi for self-improvement and inclusion. Her stable job has created avenues for her to attain economic, cultural and social resources which enable her to impersonate this new lifestyle that reflects her idealised image of upward mobility and blurring of gender roles.

Rashi's creating practice, although trivial, is significant, when one considers that she belongs to the Sindhi community where girls marry at an early age and spend their entire lives dependent on their husbands. In contrast, Rashi has undone traditional gender roles by first seeking employment and contributing towards family income and then by virtue of education and earning power creating an empowered identity that is defined by an absence of a male figure as the provider of goods. She has reinforced her status within her household by performing the other or creating practice seldom practiced by her mother (Butler, 2004; Seregina, 2019). Rashi's situation correlates with Dolan and Scott's (2009) work that points out how black women acquire some autonomy from patriarchal authority due to the presence of steady earnings. The economic, social and cultural freedom is also allowing Rashi mobility and flexibility to travel with her friends and interact freely with male-friends. When Rashi was further probed about her plans for marriage,

her narrative revealed the emerging liberal discourse around marriage in her family. She pointed out how her cousin's inter-caste marriage signals a change in the older generation's attitudes. However, she emphasised that women's elevated social status has not always worked in their favour as - *“now women are more educated than men making it very difficult to find the right life-partner”*.



**Figure 1:** *Rashi's perfume*



**Figure 2:** *Ekta's car*

A related example is that of Ekta, a 40-year-old married woman and a human resource manager in a private firm, who recounts with pride how her car purchase (albeit a budget Maruti K10, see Figure 2) has established her legitimacy in determining other household decisions pertaining to acquisitions. Thus, apart from serving a utilitarian function, the car, as a symbolic good, has helped her to redefine her identity (Butler, 2004), lending traction to her efforts of being less reliant on her financially well-off husband: *“I want people to know me beyond somebody's daughter, mother or wife. I want them to know me by my name”*. Ekta's car purchase has not only helped her to create post-feminist subjectivity, but also enabled her to defy the traditional gender script. However, what was left unsaid was the fact that domestic chores like the supervision of household helps is still her responsibility. In our work, we make a case for a more intersectional approach to post-feminism to engage with emancipatory discourses, but simultaneously critique and question the identity of Indian women as hegemonic neo-liberal consumers (Dosekun, 2015). Yet, it is undeniable that the proverbial genie is out of the bag as our participants develop an interface with modernity through consumer goods and reclaim control of their lives through the rewards of the feminine consumer culture which has become a defining feature of their individuality (McRobbie, 2007).

### *Controlling lives through symbolic capital*

Controlling as an act of extending self takes places when women exert control over objects by acquiring proficiency in driving their first car or scooter, giving gifts to their loved ones or becoming proficient in operating everyday equipment (Belk, 1988). Saba, a 26-year-old married woman working as a human resource executive in a private firm, redefines her identity by owning and acquiring proficiency in using laptop. Her story illustrates how new middle-class women are undoing gender by owning and using technological artefacts which were once in India considered gendered due to underlying socio-cultural factors (Butler, 2004; Philip, 2018). Her laptop (*see figure 3*) also asserts her symbolic capital when she uses it for writing blogs, preparing presentations or carrying with her as an important possession. She is now not dependent on her husband for laptop as she explains “*I think economic independence is a very important aspect because it creates an equal relation. I have equal status with him and we respect each other*”. She has redefined her identity and empowered her position within the household.



**Figure 3:** *Saba's Laptop*



**Figure 4:** *Bhavini's scooter*

Like Saba, controlling is evident from other women's accounts like Bhavini or Shivi when they become proficient in riding their scooter or driving their car respectively. Bhavini, an unmarried professional in her late twenties, recreates her identity when she rides her Activa scooter (*see figure 4*). Earlier she was not confident about riding a scooter and her ability to manoeuvre it successfully given her short stature but now she has not only gained in stature but grown wings as she rides it with aplomb. Indian women once occupied marginalised space in driving automobiles but the economic, cultural and social resources is allowing women to gain more mobility and a better social status than their earlier generation. As Bhavini comments, “*Had I not been going to work, I would not have thought of riding a scooter*”. This finding also resonates

with Mankekar's (2013) work where lower middle-class individuals were attracted to call centre jobs that provided them with essential capital resources to fulfil their growth aspirations and claim new middle-class status. This shows how new middle-class Indian women are becoming competent and creating shift in the power structures within the household through their employment.

These women also assert control through their act of gift-giving to their loved ones. Thus, Anju's gift of an iPhone7 (see figure 5) to her husband provides her with the tool and resource for both imagining and constructing a new self (Belk, 1988). She recalls:

*"I saved my salary and bought this iPhone as a gift for my husband. I have always gifted him something which he has aspired for. Now women can gift their husband and they don't have to think twice before doing so".*

Anju, a married woman in early thirties, working as a marketing manager with a private marble mining company, represents a growing number of Indian women who are undoing traditional household dynamics by assuming the roles of a gift-giver and a caretaker, historically performed by male members of the family (Butler, 2004; Seregina, 2019). Authors point out that when women bestow gifts on others, it can also be understood as giving gift to self because it is akin to celebrating their agency via creative self-invention (Mick and DeMoss, 1990; Tynan et al., 2010). Anju was earlier dependent on her parents, but continuing her job after marriage in order to retain her self-reliance classifies her as dynamic, freely choosing, self-reinventing post-feminist subject who aspires to act as a role model *"I want to work because I want to set a good example for my children"*. Although Anju opted to tie the knot with a man of her choice, she keeps her savings account separate from her husband to retain the control of her income. However, she invests in her relationship through gift-giving not only to undo prevalent gender roles but strengthen her bond with her partner and her family.

We also discerned that women continuously negotiated their fluid identity through knowledge, appearance and behaviours acquired by an enhanced awareness and use of marketplace products.

#### *Knowing the consumption context and space*

For new middle-class Indian women consumption fills salient purposes in their lives, literally giving wings to their aspirations, as they seek knowledge, satisfaction and meaning from purchases that have become part of their selves (Belk, 1988). They are now more aware of online shopping, new fashion trends, brands and quality products and services that shape their modern subjectivities and social status. For Asha, a married woman in her late twenties, working as an associate finance manager with a multinational firm, her job not only contributes to her sense of self, but also provides her with the knowledge of the consumption context as she hears about the availability of new products and services from her colleagues. She recounts:

*“I learned about ankle-length leggings and new spa services from my mates at work. I will buy these leggings next time. This has increased my knowledge and confidence. If I were without a job, it would not have been possible”.*

The financial empowerment of Asha has allowed her to learn and perform newly acquired cosmopolitan lifestyle which embodies post-feminist subjectivity. She routinely uses her up-to-date knowledge to buy consumer goods to show her inclusion and strengthen her social and cultural resources that reflects her aspiration for upward mobility. For Asha, workplace is the path to attain symbolic capital which further redefines her identity and legitimises her status in family. This finding is in parallel with Üstüner and Thompson’s (2012) analysis that states how underclass hairdressers’ make salons as a source to acquire symbolic capital to claim middle-class identity.

However, Asha explained that continuing her employment after marriage was not an easy decision for her. Previously, there was a lot of resistance from her in-laws on her decision to continue with her job after marriage, but when her employment brought financial stability they acquiesced. Asha has undone the traditional social mores of a convention-bound family by becoming the first daughter-in-law in the family with a job (Butler, 2004, Seregina, 2019). Her knowledge about the consumption context and space has translated routine buying into a relational and familial affair as her family depends on her good taste to engage in discretionary spending on commodities required to add to domestic comfort.

Similarly, Niha also assumes greater authority in her family when she gains knowledge about the speaker, a Boat Company product, from her colleagues and buys it for her parents. Earlier Niha was dependent on her parents but her economic, cultural and social freedom made her more informed and independent. She points to the picture of the speaker (*see figure 6*) and comments: *“Now I am aware about many new things and can buy whatever I wish. There is no restriction and questioning”*. She is now not only aware about different products, but also has the economic capital to confidently own those products. Our finding is in contrast to prior study of Üstüner and Holt (2007) that underlines how women could only perform the knowledge, but not own the products due to lack of economic resources. Niha has undone traditional gender roles, that limited women’s growth, by displaying her learning and strengthening her social and cultural resources which her mother could seldom acquire (Seregina, 2019). This reflects in her statement when she says *“I am someone”*.



**Figure 5:** Anju's iPhone7



**Figure 6:** Niha's speakers

Similarly, Khushi, Nisa, Megha and Mani all explained how they had become aware of latest trends, technology and other consumer goods. However, the performance of knowledge as well as power to own goods has contributed to a growth in self-management and self-discipline that underpin their transforming perspectives on consumption as they engage in mindful consumption.

#### *Transforming Perspectives on Consumption*

We noted a tendency to embrace mindful consumption among our participants, who with their knowledge and careful assessment of the impact of their purchases on their families, drew upon mindfulness that not only serves as an antidote to the negative aspects of consumerism but transforms their identity (Cheetham and McEachern, 2013; Rosenberg, 2006). Thus, Bhavini, a 29-year-old single woman working as a Junior Chemist with a multi-national company for the last eight years, experiences transformation when she set aside her savings to renovate her parents' home. Her transformed perspective on consumption lends her a sense of accomplishment after she selflessly spends her earning on her parents' house. This also gives a glimpse of post-feminist imaginary where Bhavini uses marketplace services to redefine her identity. It is a significant achievement in patriarchal Indian household that a female not only earns money but also contributes to the betterment of her family. This act completely changes Bhavini's perspective and she feels more capable and independent. She looks at the photograph (*see figure 7*) with a glint of joy and pride as she remarks: *"I feel proud that I could do something for my family. My father says that a son could never do what my daughter has done and this feeling of bliss that I experience is priceless!"*

The photograph shows how by renovating her parents' house with her earnings Bhavini is resisting the traditional gender norms (Butler, 2004). In so doing, Bhavini has become an inspiration for her neighbours

who want their children to emulate her. She recounts *“They realized the importance of education and employment. They now tell their daughters that they have to do job like me when they grow up”*. She has redefined her identity not only within her family but also in her community. The economic empowerment has further enabled her to gain social and cultural freedom. She mentions how her parents do not place restrictions if she lives in another city for work. She further discusses about her plans for marriage and explains that it is not usual for girls in Indian society to be single at her age, but her employment has bequeathed her with that power. She confesses that she is happy with either love or an arranged marriage provided the man is employed and allows her to pursue her job.



**Figure 7:** *Bhavini's House*



**Figure 8:** *Veena's Child's Education Fees*

Similarly, Veena, a 30-year-old married woman, working as a training manager for an insurance company, has experienced transformed perspective on consumption as she sets her savings aside to earn better education and quality life for her son. Veena excitedly shared a picture of her son's first day at school (see figure 8) and emotionally narrated:

*“My child's education is special because my husband and I have decided that I will pay for my child's education. Now that I am a working-woman I can afford expensive and quality education for him and can pay for his professional degree and skills building courses”*.

Veena's transformation is significant because in a traditional patriarchal household, husbands usually bear all the expenditure including the school fees of the children. However, the economic empowerment has

allowed Veena to take the onus of her child's education on herself and thus undo the prevalent traditional beliefs on gender roles (Butler, 2004). She feels had she been a housewife, she could have given quality time to her child but her child would have been deprived of good education and other luxury necessities of a good life. Therefore, before marriage she made it quite clear to her husband and in-laws about her decision to continue with her employment after marriage. *"I told my husband before marriage that I will work and no one will ask me about my salary. I am working for myself. My in-laws supported me and now I don't have to worry anymore about the household chores after returning from work. I also have increased the savings and I and my husband together manage the expenses"*. This resonates with Pandey's (2014) analysis who argues that middle-class Indian working-women are not only spending for self, but gaining gratification by allocating their income for household welfare.

Overall, these narratives affirm the women's identity as the 'ideal' third world subjects who, placated by their earnings and attendant access to consumer culture, do not aspire to migrate to the West, but stay put and acquire products that are not only self-enhancing, but also serve as tools to restructure the household dynamics (Baviskar and Roy, 2016; Dosekun, 2015).

## **Discussion**

Women's narratives illustrate how newly equipped with the capital resources, they are *undoing* the gender and empowering their status within their family and community by *performing the other* or consumption practices, hitherto considered a male domain (Butler, 2004). This reliance on the marketplace to contest patriarchal authority that is resulting in blurring of gender roles is consistent with the ideology of post-feminism (Maclaran, 2012).

Our analysis suggests how workplace is an essential path for our participants to attain symbolic capital that enables them upward social mobility and redefines their identity. Unlike earlier studies (Derne et al., 2014; Ganguly-Scrase, 2003) that suggest that working-women have to accommodate two shifts (role of a housewife plus job), our work illustrates how new middle-class women's parents, husband and in-laws are equally supporting them by allowing them to work as well as by sharing household responsibilities. Further, Ganguly-Scrase (2003), Dolan and Scott (2009) and Dolan et al. (2012) contend that women are allowed a particular level of autonomy which enables them to strengthen their gender roles, but largely women's status in the household is still considered subordinate to men, but our work suggests that this subordination is gradually eroding and in most cases is even absent. This is evident from our participants' financial risk-taking decisions whereby they have invested money in assets and launched their own enterprise. For instance, Anju who invested her income in real estate and Rashi in online business that she is managing in parallel with her job, are examples of how women are efficiently managing their aspirations for upward

social mobility and their imagined futures. They are continuously reshaping and reproducing their capital resources to be more empowered than their parents. In this regard, our findings detract from some of the extant work (see Mankekar, 2013; Üstüner and Holt, 2007) where lack of sufficient capital hindered the fulfilment of women's ambitions. Whilst our participants come across as rational and goal-oriented, they still operate in a context that is dismissive of their agency. It is undeniable that in the Indian society "*there is an ongoing but still largely untold story of persistent – and persistently gendered – injustice . . . the tedious monotony of poverty, of violence against women and . . . a heightening, not diminution, of inequality*" (Gill, 2016, p. 609).

Nevertheless, what emerge from our participants' accounts are their tremendous strength and their propensity to acquire the status of a role model for their family members who look up to them. Yet, it cannot be negated that in this position of accountability, our participants find themselves trapped in what Rodier and Meagher (2014) call "*a double bind*" (p. 189) where they are encouraged to take care of themselves, but caring for themselves, is not for their own sake, but ultimately, for their family members who look up to them. This ties in with Springer's (2007) work on talented and successful black women who are required to be "*humble about their faculties and use them in the service of others*" (p. 257). Thus, within a post-feminist context, women are pledged an endless capacity for self-directed awareness, but when they falter in achieving this self-determination, McRobbie (2009) posits, they are "*encouraged to seek therapy, counselling, or guidance*" (p. 60) rather than question the nature of the demands placed upon them. Whilst our participants did not allude to any therapy they were seeking, the necessity to be 'strong, respectable and an ability to multi-task' figured as an under-current in their accounts. There was conscious reiteration of instances where they reinforced their status within their family and community by performing roles, once considered masculine (e.g. renovating parents' house, bearing the education expenses of children, buying assets, starting their own business and negotiating conjugal relations irrespective of caste, class and religion).

Further, following Brosius (2010) we confirm that although the quest of growth and mobility has brought elements of global consumerism in the lifestyle of new middle-class women, they have simultaneously maintained their *distinctly Indian* subjectivity. This is visible in the form of presence of joint family, arranged marriages and women's conformity to tradition and religion both in domestic and public spheres. The difference is that there is much liberal discourse around these practices and they are packaged and circulated across the society with new meanings, images and concepts (e.g. women have traditionally worn *Mangal Sutra*, a necklace worn by Hindu women as a signifier of their marital status, but it is now worn as a fashion accessory).

This duality has enabled new middle-class women to form a hybrid feminine identity. This implies that they resolve tensions between traditional and modern domains by ensuring that they are neither too traditional nor too modern. Thus, whilst they are undoing traditional gender roles, they are to certain extent mindful of caste, class and cultural specifications within which they must perform their consumption practices (Joy et al., 2015). It is worth noting that familial values, despite many emancipatory messages, do overwhelmingly maintain a patriarchal tone implying that the preservation of the family is predominantly a woman's role (Majstorović, 2016). This implies that whilst it is acceptable for women to take recourse to affective modalities such as vulnerability and anger, they are required quickly to 'move on' and reframe their experiences in an upbeat, forward-thinking and positive manner 'for the sake of the family' (Gill, 2016). This makes our enquiry extremely significant as we engage with how new middle-class Indian women strive and struggle to dismantle various forms of patriarchal social structures and practices – "*the determining factor is their participation in resistant praxis and not their identity*" (Grewal and Kaplan, 1994, p. 18).

## **Conclusion**

In investigating the emerging consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women, we make the following theoretical, practical and policy level contributions.

### *Theoretical and Methodological Contributions*

Our work makes a case for a more intersectional approach to post-feminism as we argue in favour of fully accounting for the ways in which it can incorporate voices of women of colour. We also add gender perspective to the literature on middle-class and global consumerism. Extant studies have used behaviour theories or gender scholarship to study women's consumption behaviour. We move beyond the common viewpoint of behavioural aspects or binary divisions to further an understanding of how women *undo gender* through their everyday practices by *performing the other* (i.e. by enacting gender roles in an alternative way) (Butler, 2004). The theoretical perspective of Butler (2004) provides an understanding on how women use marketplace offerings not only to redefine their identities but also to rebel by undoing the prevalent gender norms.

Broadly speaking, we contribute to the consumer research area of emerging markets and, in particular, to the work on new middle-class Indian women. Extant research has mainly diminished the new middle-class status to indulgence in global consumerism, but our work highlights how our participants empower themselves and continuously reproduce their new middle-class identity through their symbolic capital (Donner, 2011). We illustrate how workplace equips women with symbolic capital which allows them to impersonate new post-feminist lifestyle and subjectivities. These "*structural transformations associated*

*with the neoliberal ideologies of individuality and self-governance have instigated more calculated strategies to brand the self”* (Duffy and Hund, 2015, p. 2). The rhetoric of personal branding revels in individual choice, unconventionality and modes of self-expression that often result in an acquisition of gifts for self (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2004; Park, 2018).

Further, our adoption of photo-elicitation interviews coupled with semi-structured interviews provides a novel and useful way to understand the significant meaning underlying the typical consumption practices of new middle-class Indian women. In so doing, we not only respond to Jafari et al’s (2012) call to extend new methodological approach in the context of emerging markets but also to respond Eckhardt and Dholakia’s (2013) call to conduct qualitative studies on Asian consumers. In traditional, sensitive and culturally diverse sites such as India, women participants can sometimes be reticent and feel uncomfortable to talk freely about their daily consumption habits. Given this context, photographs acted as projective stimuli in starting the conversation and generating quality data (Tinkler, 2013). They facilitated in building rapport and allowing women to actively participate in the study.

#### *Practical Implications*

Our work has practical implications on a number of fronts. First, from marketing perspective, there is a need for firms to redefine their conventional beliefs around Indian women. Women are now decision-makers and have purchasing power which is redefining their identity and status within their household. Our findings illustrate that women are consuming goods not only to seek pleasure but also to reward themselves. It is therefore prudent for firms to break gender stereotypes and frame their product campaigns emphasizing development of women’s personal and social self. One of the recent examples in this line is of Ariel’s washing powder advertisement “Share the load campaign” that questions the ingrained belief of Indian household pertaining to laundry being only a woman’s job? Similarly, companies can increasingly design campaigns that empower women’s self-confidence and strengthen their position in Indian society.

The gendered perspective can contribute to a better understanding of the buyer-seller relationships (especially with regard to decisions on the deployment of particular sales staff to enhance customer experience) and enable marketers to reflect on how they conduct research and sell products (Beetles and Crane, 2005).

Second, firms can benefit from these emerging new middle-class women consumers by specifically understanding women’s preferences and designing and promoting products and services to suit their needs. For instance, the consumption practices illustrate how Indian women are now buying as well as driving cars (and scooters). Women usually occupy a marginalised place in the ownership of automobiles implying that marketing communication for such products indicates that they are targeted primarily to male audiences

(Dobbs, 2005). However, access to private transport such as scooter or car allows women access to education, employment and thus determines their economic inclusion (Dobbs, 2005). Therefore, there is utility in firms responding to these trends by designing vehicles aimed at working-women to also include middle-aged and older women (Dolan and Tincknell, 2012).

Third, our work underlines the significance of investment options for new middle-class Indian women because of their increased income and higher savings. Our findings indicate that women are increasingly investing in assets such as land. Extant research suggests that women's ownership of assets gives them financial security and reduces gender disparities by providing them access and control over resources (Doss, 2013; Mishra and Sam, 2016). Further studies can indicate how women's ownership of assets empowers them and result in higher investment in education, health and other community building projects (Mishra and Sam, 2016). Although our findings show that women are investing in children's education or real estate, there are very limited array of financial products that focus on investment plans especially for Indian women (Paluri and Mehra, 2016). We believe that there are a number of actions that financial service organisations can undertake. First, organisations can benefit by attracting this newly empowered segment of the population by enhancing their financial literacy through appropriate communication channels. The potential is immense given that a majority of Indian women are only aware of fixed deposits and savings plans as an investment choice (Paluri and Mehra, 2016). Individuals with sound financial literacy are more likely to invest in assets and fixed deposits rather than savings accounts and life insurance options that give lower returns (Grohmann, 2018). Moreover, individuals tend to have higher voluntary savings and better retirement planning when they have sound financial literacy (Grohmann, 2018). Second, given that females are more profitable to serve (Alesina et al., 2013) and display enhanced loyalty behaviours when products are personalised (Melnyk and van Osselaer, 2012), there is more utility for firms in attracting women consumers. Thus, sound financial decisions will not only help women in managing personal finance but also in enhancing their role in household decision-making. Such enhanced decision-making is very crucial in filling the gender gap, redefining their identity and status within the family.

Overall, firms operating in India that recognise the potential and the significance of this new female consumer base will reap benefits. An understanding of the four consumption practices can help firms to effectively reach and serve this segment, who in turn are expected to drive the consumer goods market in future making India 27% richer by 2025 (Sachitanand, 2012; The Economist, 2018).

#### *Policy level implications*

Based on our work, we advance two key suggestions for policymakers. We underline the significance of working-women and their contribution towards the growth of Indian society and economy. Given, Indian women with high disposable income make independent purchase decisions; they are a key driver for economic growth and consequently form the backbone for rising global demand (Kharas, 2017). Despite the fact that women are significant contributor in the growth of society and economy, it is not evident that they are encouraged to join the workforce. A country cannot have an inclusive development when half of its population is not contributing towards its economic growth. Therefore, policymakers are urged to create safe and conducive environment for working-women through implementing strong legislation where applicable so that aspiring women are able to join the workforce. The true challenge will be to monitor and implement strong public policies to safeguard working-women's rights by supporting diversity in workplace through positive discrimination when recruiting more women for jobs, providing public safety and safe transport, executing zero-tolerance for sexual harassment at workplace, advancing equal pay and rights legislation - childcare support and extended maternity leave with job security are a few examples where direct policy action could be implemented. If Indian policymakers are successful in rebalancing the workforce through strict policy implementations in these areas, the increase in employment rate of women will provide India with additional 235 million workers (The Economist, 2018). This number is even higher than the aggregate male and female population in EU and can drastically shape not only the future growth of Indian economy but also standard of living of Indian women (Dixon, 2018; The Economist, 2018). This makes our findings very timely and significant as they provide a more reflexive account of consumption practices of Indian women.

Second, our work provides insights into how women are saving and investing their earnings for family's future security. Women often invest income under their authority in goods that promote well-being of the family such as health, children's education, thereby improving the household welfare and increasing the productivity of the next generation (Dolan et al., 2012; Kabeer, 2016). If a woman is socially and economically more independent she will promote the same qualities in her children and family. This can minimise the social vices from the society and promote thinking which is beneficial for the development of household and society. Towards this end, regulators of the financial services industry in India can develop policy guidelines that encourage financial service organisations to both create products that are aimed at women in general and to implement measures designed to increase the financial literacy amongst women at an early stage. Overall, by engaging with the ever-changing consumption practices of new middle class Indian women, we contribute to *“the discipline's understanding of both social life and the life of the consumer, by perceiving the consumer to be a user, not buyer, and the act of consumption for many female*

*consumers as experiential and recreational . . . rather than utilitarian*” (Kumar and Varshney, 2012, p. 626-7).

### **Limitations and future research**

Notwithstanding theoretical and practical contributions of examining how Indian women’s consumption practices are engendering shift in existing gender inequalities, we also acknowledge limitations of our study. Future research can gain by using ethnographic longitudinal approach to examine how the economic, social and cultural resources of women enable them to redefine their identity over time. Further research can also use similar theoretical and methodological contexts to explore how consumption practices of women in developing countries are serving as reference points to examine flux in archetypal identities and its impact on their buying behaviour. Moreover, inquiries can also be conducted to examine how consumption practices of women are affecting other practices such as driving, eating out, snacking, shopping, saving, investing, fitness and well-being.

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