Title

Consumer Culture and Symbolic Capital in a Differentiated Pakistani Transnational Community: ‘It is a Fake Type of Izzat’

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Abstract

Drawing on original qualitative data this paper analyses fluid and shifting notions of symbolic capital within the Pakistani diaspora in Newcastle upon Tyne, North East England. Focusing on the South Asian concept of izzat (honour/prestige) it is argued that the field of local symbolic prestige is adapting to the macro context laid down by consumer culture as its mechanisms permeate the structural, cultural and everyday lives of this transnational community. This is partially and differentially influencing forms of cultural and symbolic capital accumulation in the community, as evidenced by subtle and varied changes in the appropriation and exchange of izzat. Izzat is a phenomenon which has been centrally embedded within Pakistani cultures and societies for centuries. Our key argument is that the context and nature of izzat amongst the Pakistani transnational community studied is being significantly shaped and altered by the role of consumer culture in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, but that this simultaneously maps onto existing hierarchies and social differentiation within this transnational community, as well as contemporary discourse on and divisions over Muslim identity and piety.

Keywords

British Pakistani, Consumer Culture, Izzat, Symbolic Capital, Transnational Community
Funding Statement

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is the intersection between consumer culture, symbolic capital and izzat (honour/prestige) within a differentiated Pakistani transnational community. Drawing upon original qualitative research, we capture some of the complex cultural mechanisms through which consumer symbolism sets an adaptive context for symbolic capital accumulation in a specific and under-researched ‘diaspora space’ (Brah, 1996). We suggest that the field of local symbolic prestige is adapting to the macro context laid down by consumer culture as its mechanisms permeate the structural, cultural and everyday lives of the diaspora, but that this is partially and differentially influencing social relations and cultural practices, as evidenced by subtle and varied changes in the appropriation and exchange of izzat. Izzat is a phenomenon which has been centrally embedded within Pakistani cultures and societies for centuries. Our key argument is that the context and nature of izzat is being significantly shaped and altered by the role of consumer culture in the late twentieth and early twenty first century, but that these changes simultaneously map onto existing hierarchies and social differentiation within this transnational Pakistani community, as well as contemporary discourses on and divisions over Muslim identity and piety.

There is a substantial body of existing research on the UK Pakistani diaspora and its transnational connections focusing on a range of issues, including the ‘myth of return’ (Anwar, 1979; Bolognani, 2007), kinship, gender and community (Shaw, 2000; Werbner, 2000), economic, cultural and political transnationalism (Ballard, 2003; Rehman and Kalra, 2006; Werbner, 1999); transnational marriage (Charsley, 2013; Charsley and Bolognani, 2021; Shaw, 2006) and citizenship and identity (Hussain and Bagguley, 2013; Mythen, 2012). While there has been some attention to the role of consumerism and its relationship to power relations within Pakistani transnationalism (Bolognani, 2014; Erdal, 2012; Harris, 2011; Maqsood 2017), this has not previously been explicitly connected to the phenomenon of izzat, nor fully to hierarchical differentiation within the Pakistani diaspora, with the primary focus to date
being on social power relations and differentiation between the diaspora and permanent residents within Pakistan. Drawing upon in-depth interviews and focus groups with 40 members of the Pakistani diaspora in Newcastle upon Tyne, this paper builds on previous analysis of intra-diasporic hierarchy among Pakistani communities in the UK (e.g. Charsley and Bolognani, 2017) by highlighting the significance of the relationship between consumer culture, symbolic capital and izzat.

Honour, izzat and symbolic capital
At the beginning of the twenty-first century there has been a re-emergence of academic and activist work in the UK analysing the impact of honour and shame on the lives of ethnic minority communities, predominantly women of South Asian and Middle Eastern heritage, and particularly in relation to violent crime and victimisation (e.g. Gill, 2009; Idriss & Abbas, 2011; Thiara & Gill, 2010; Walker 2020). This work can be considerate and valuable, but in the popular press it is often sensationalist, essentialist and connected explicitly to the rising tide and political imperatives of Islamophobia within the post 9-11 world (Edwards 2021). Furthermore, the sole focus on crime and victimisation also misses the more routine and everyday dynamics of honour and shame as norms, value systems and traditions embedded in broader cultural and politico-economic processes and contexts (Soni, 2012).

A wider relevance can be drawn from the heightened public interest in cases of honour-based violence: a need to revisit honour, shame, respect and ‘face’ as concepts that persist under late-modern conditions (Werbner, 2007). Consequently, our research set out to explore a cultural context within which UK political and public discourse usually associates honour and shame with violence and victimisation to challenge reductionist, essentialist and Islamophobic depictions of British Pakistanis. While examining the intricacies and divergence of the honour and shame complex within the everyday socio-cultural practices of a differentiated diaspora, it became clear that the ideology of honour and shame does not ceaselessly culminate in acts of intrafamilial violence and aggression. Rather, izzat – as a form of symbolic capital – is manifest in a broad range of ideas, actions, obligations, values, orientations and behaviours, which fluctuate depending on variations in social categories, contexts, points of social closure and intersecting axes of power.

Izzat is a concept that originated in the Islamic cultures to the north of South Asia but is now utilised among South Asian communities worldwide as a measure of individual, familial and
community levels of honour, respect and social standing. It is widely accepted that across South Asian transnational communities evaluations of behaviour remain largely honour-based and that the maintenance of izzat has for centuries been, and still is, a vital vehicle for the cultural reproduction of a particular social structure and way of life (Gunasinghe et al., 2019; Lefebvre, 1999; Shaw, 2000; Soni, 2012; Werbner, 1990). Izzat helps establish and sustain social hierarchies and is deeply embedded in the politics of class, caste, gender, family, marriage and community.

A major contention within this paper is that the context and nature of izzat among the Pakistani transnational community studied has been at least partially transformed by the role of consumer culture in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. However, it is also important to recognise that izzat is a multi-faceted phenomenon with an inherently fluid and dynamic nature. It can be gained, lost and converted in various ways and can refer to ‘caste and class status, to public reputation and to symbolic capital accumulation through generosity towards guests and inferiors’ (Werbner, 2007: 167). Izzat is yours and your family’s reputation, level of respect and prominence in the community. This distinction is not exclusively related to wealth, material possession and power, but should be understood as existing in a complex set of social, political and economic relations. As we suggest here, broader political and economic contexts can have formative effects on the type of honour that is valued and symbolically legitimated.

Consumption and izzat
From the end of the 17th century in Britain ‘consumption started to be identified as a meaningful category, supplanting the notion of luxury in moral discourse’ (Sassatelli, 2007: 35, original emphasis). The individual’s relationship with material culture and desire for luxury goods was the primary fuel for the demand side of economic growth. Over time luxury goods came to symbolise good taste and personal enhancement, constructing and determining one’s worth (Veblen, 1994). The politico-economic shift from production to consumption in the global North, which reached its zenith in the 1980s, was accompanied by a pervasive form of social and cultural marketisation. As a result, embodied norms, dispositions, orientations and beliefs also shifted and became increasingly attuned to the system of commodified objects. The ascendency of neoliberalism fostered an even further intensified vision of commodification, which had a formative effect on shifting forms of cultural and symbolic capital and demanded different ways of accumulating and exchanging them (McDonald and Wearing, 2013; Smart, 2010).
Departing from Veblen’s account of conspicuous consumption among the aspiring middle classes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Bauman’s (2007) work on the consumer society locates a new ‘consumer syndrome’ containing varied predispositions that together make up a ‘life-programme’ distinguishable from its productivist predecessor. This can be understood as a ‘switching of values between duration and transience… [and] an emphatic denial of the virtue of procrastination’ (Rojek, 2004:293). In other words, consumerism today isn’t simply a matter of positional struggle among the middle class but is open to all and seductive in its promise of instant gratification and disposability. However, as Appadurai points out, drawing on Baudrillard (1981) and Bourdieu (1984), although the characteristics of consumer demand in historical societies are largely understood as ‘rigid, slow to move, weak in their capacity to commensurate, tied to hierarchy, discrimination, and rank in social life’ and set in contradistinction to contemporary consumer societies of ‘high velocity, rapid turnover, the illusion of total access… [and] assumption of a democracy of consumers’, those who control contemporary fashion and taste ‘are no less effective in… marking social rank and discrimination, and placing consumers in a game whose ever-shifting rules are determined by… experts who dwell at the top of society’ (Appadurai, 2013:32). Key to our argument is how within this transnational community consumerism and the display of positional goods form part of a field of local symbolic prestige with important implications connected to social power relations.

On their initial encounters with a competitive consumer culture in Britain, the first Pakistani migrants perceived it as lacking honour and respect to the extent that it was not ‘worthy of emulation’; if one was found emulating the hedonism and individualism of English culture one would often be ‘accused of being be-izzat – without honour’ (Ballard 1994: 15). However, the significance attached to maintaining and increasing one’s izzat in the new environment generated competition that, no matter how reluctant agents were, became adaptive: ‘It follows that as soon as competition for izzat takes off, there can be no escape; anyone who fails to play the game will by definition lose face’ (Ballard, 1994: 15). The game had to be played in Britain, and its culture, eventually reshaped by global neoliberalism, became ‘[the] arena for status competition [where a] higher premium gradually began to be placed on moral conformity’ (Ballard, 1994: 15). Moreover, as circuits of capital accumulation and knowledge production spread, the global political and cultural landscape changed and a global consumer culture began
to transcend national boundaries, enveloping, among others, Pakistani transnational communities (Bolognani, 2014; Erdal 2012).

While recognising that consumerism can feature prominently in contemporary lives irrespective of ethnicity and diasporic formation, there are nevertheless important distinctions and dynamics at play in this specific diaspora space that require further analysis. These dynamics can be seemingly contradictory in that they encapsulate competing cultural practices and sensibilities at the same time (Radhakrishnan, 2011). Shifting notions of izzat are also being shaped by, for example, political and cultural discourses of religion and belonging among the diaspora. Some twenty first century discussions of the relationship between consumerism and honour within the contemporary Pakistani diaspora focus on the implications for Muslim identity and piety within the context of global Islamophobia (Ajala, 2018; Harris, 2011; Maqsood, 2017). These accounts reveal that there is no necessary tension between conspicuous consumption and contemporary Muslim identity/piety, rather that differing forms of consumption are now central to struggles over, and competition for, Muslim identities within a differentiated and hierarchical transnational Pakistani community. These studies also stress the importance of an ‘imagined outside audience’ (Maqsood 2017: 3) as an important dynamic behind contemporary consumer displays within a transnational community often represented by global mass-mediated discourses of terrorism and religious violence.

In the Bourdieusian sense, consumer capitalism is one broad macro field within which various meso and micro fields operate as sites in which individuals compete to accumulate and exchange cultural and economic forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1990). Our research participants exist in the dialectic between this external world of consumer objects and their subjective social experiences and relationships within it. Individuals gain a ‘feel for the game’ and their habitus shifts and adapts in order to compete for forms of cultural and economic capital. It is only following a process of legitimation that these forms of capital can become symbolic capital, or in the context of Pakistani social relations izzat, and be exploited for a return (Bourdieu 1979, 1984; Skeggs, 1997). Therefore, the nature and value of izzat as a form of symbolic capital is mutating and expanding in the varied historical, political, economic and cultural contexts in which it is constantly constituted, maintained and reproduced. These contexts and their complex dynamics are not exclusively related to consumerism but form the focus of the discussion in this article.
The research process

The history of Pakistani migration to the UK is well documented (Ballard 1994; Shaw 2000; Werbner 2000). However, there has been very little documentation of Pakistani settlement in the North East of England. The North East is a region with a comparatively low number of minority ethnic communities. However, a significant South Asian and a majority Pakistani population reside in Newcastle upon Tyne (ONS, 2011). Most Pakistani migrants and their families in the UK originate from the rural Mirpur district of Pakistani-administered Azad Kashmir and Punjab province in Pakistan. More recently the UK began to host one of the largest Pashtun diasporas from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, formerly North West Frontier Province (Change Institute, 2009; Kalra, 2009; Maqbool, 2010). This differentiation, drawn according to regional subgroup, is evident in the ethnic and cultural make-up of the Newcastle diaspora.

The empirical research on which this paper is based consisted of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 40 members of the Pakistani diaspora in the city. Data was collected in Newcastle over a four-year period from October 2010, with follow up interviews conducted in 2019.

The individuals interviewed are a postcolonial people living in an age of global neoliberalism but also in a local context in which austerity and deindustrialisation are confronted and played out in everyday life. However, these contextual factors differentially impact on individuals because their lived experiences are varied in relation to wide-ranging and intersecting ‘axes of differentiation’, such as their migratory histories, regional associations, age, gender, class and caste background. Indeed, our research participants come from different parts of Pakistan, from different positions in the social hierarchy and have significantly different experiences of migration. As Avtar Brah’s (1996) classic work contends, a significant analytical issue in diaspora studies is examining how a group becomes ‘situated’ in its place of settlement in economic, political and cultural terms, and how this affects its ‘relational positioning’. The ‘concept of diaspora centres on configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another’ (Brah, 1996: 183, emphasis in original). Pakistanis in Newcastle do not form a homogenous, stable ethnic group, but live in a multidimensional social space (Bourdieu, 1985), which encompasses certain shared values and practices, yet is fragmented and diverse (Bolognani, 2009). Not only have groups formed in relation to their regional point of departure (Mirpur/Azad Kashmir, West Punjab, or Khyber Pakhtunkhwa), but also the specific personal and practical reasons behind the migration, the time of the migration and the categories of gender, social class and caste.
After the grounded theoretical sampling had established the relevance of regional sub-groups of Pakistanis in the city, the respondents were grouped according to three specific points of departure in Pakistan represented by the ethno-cultural groups of Punjabi, Mirpuri and Pashtun. In this instance, when referring to ethno-cultural groups they are understood as regional sub-groups with distinct cultures, a definition that departs from the orthodox nationalist conceptualisation of ethnicity. The respondents labelled themselves according to their region and the distinct ethnic and cultural identities therein. To analyse modes of categorisation and closure that exist between classed, gendered and ethno-cultural groups, respondents included both men and women of Pakistani heritage living in Newcastle upon Tyne who individually, or whose family had originally, derived from the three regional areas in focus. Of the 23 original individual interviews and 3 focus groups (which included another 17 respondents in total), interviews with 10 Mirpuris, 18 Punjabis and 12 Pashtuns were undertaken.

All but two of the Pashtuns interviewed (83 per cent) were new skilled migrants who descended from Peshawar, which, although categorised as a city, they described as relatively rural and conservative in comparison to cosmopolitan cities such as Lahore or Faisalabad. They had lived in the UK for between 2 months and 10 years, having originally moved to study. The remaining two Pashtuns – a husband and wife – were new migrants who had emigrated from a tribal village near Mardan in North West Pakistan and were working in a low skilled security job and unemployed respectively. The Punjabis and Mirpuris interviewed were either members of a predominantly male pioneer generation of migrants who were directly recruited by the UK government in the context of a post-World War II labour shortage, their partners and offspring who had joined them in the 60s and 70s, or second-generation children and grandchildren of the pioneer generation who were born in Newcastle. The age of participants ranged from 21 to 73. The Mirpuris interviewed arrived as (or their family arrived as) labour migrants. The Punjabis were a mix of labour migrants and highly skilled migrants; some of their parents had received Commonwealth Scholarships. The Mirpuris who took part in the interviews had connections to different villages in Mirpur district and the Punjabis to Lahore, Sahiwal, Faisalabad and Mian Channu in Khanewal district – all urban areas in Punjab province.

The Pakistani population in Newcastle is constituted by a broad range of class backgrounds, and social groups are divided spatially as well as socio-economically in the city. The largest Pakistani population can be found in the West End of Newcastle, which is an area that in part
characterises a locale typified by high levels of unemployment and deprivation. In these areas we find cheaper housing and therefore those who seek this housing tend to be the unemployed, low level service workers, new migrants, and the elderly. The West End was also the area where the key sources of post-war industrial employment were situated, with immigrant families, whose pioneer members were employed in industry, having settled and remained there. There are stigmatised and impoverished parts of the West End and wealthier, less-stigmatised parts. Most participants in this research lived in both, while a minority lived in wealthier suburbs elsewhere in the city. All the Mirpuri and Pashtun respondents lived in the West End of Newcastle. Among the ‘established community’ of Mirpuris and Punjabis it was clear that Mirpuris had remained in the West End, in the stigmatised south and the less stigmatised north of the area, whereas Punjabis either lived or had lived to the north (45 per cent) or lived in wealthier suburbs of the city (55 per cent). As will become clear, a certain amount of affluence and status, and a correspondingly higher degree of cultural and symbolic capital, was apparent among members of the Punjabi community, whereas the Pashtuns had grouped together in the West End because it was affordable and the consumer goods they were more familiar with from ‘home’ were readily available.

**Newcastle’s Pakistani diaspora: relational positioning and symbolic capital accumulation**

As touched on above, frequently members of the diaspora in Newcastle categorise themselves according to their regional ethno-cultural group: Mirpuri, Punjabi or Pashtun, and these associations intersect with kinship, caste and social class in complex ways. Conversations often centred on the specifics and deviations of migratory and cultural histories, employment trajectories and socio-economic backgrounds. For example, the research included interviews with the largest Pakistani group in the city, Mirpuris, who recalled similar experiences to those mentioned by Kalra (2000) in his study in Oldham: the pioneer generation of men had travelled to the UK from rural Mirpur as unskilled labour migrants post-World War II, some also having been displaced as a result of the construction of the Mangla Dam in the 1960s – a mega irrigation project funded by the British which flooded surrounding villages. Wives and children had joined their male family members in the 60s and 70s and they had been employed in British industry until its collapse in the 1980s. At this point their employment trajectories became dominated by cycles of various forms of part-time, low-paid, service sector work and unemployment, or working for small family businesses. Punjabis had also established themselves in the city since the first wave of migration in the 1940s and 1950s. They too were members of the pioneer generation yet on average held more privileged socio-economic
positions than Mirpuris. They were either successful businesspeople, professionals, or worked in skilled jobs in higher education or the public sector. Mirpuris and Punjabis are established in Newcastle yet tended not to regard themselves as members of a collective Pakistani social group or ‘community’. New skilled Pashtuns had arrived in Newcastle in the 1990s and 2000s and were current or former students, many of whom had moved into skilled professions or had begun to set up businesses in the city. Having lived in the city for a relatively shorter period, Pashtuns did not class themselves as members of the ‘established community’ and often spoke of the differences in terms of background and migratory experience, especially in comparison to the established Mirpuri community.

One respondent, Yaser, explained these regional divisions in Pakistan:

> Within Pakistan, depending on which province you’re from, there is inter-cultural rivalry. And some are more cosmopolitan and modern. There is more Western influence in Lahore for example, but places like Peshawar, which borders Afghanistan, has historically seen itself separate from Pakistan and is quite tribal…there are so many differences throughout Pakistan.

Bilal, a Pasthun, confirmed that this division continues to exist among the diaspora in Newcastle, specifically between the old and new generations of migrants:

> We are not too much in the community who came here in the 60s, because we don’t have that much strong relationships with that community… you will laugh, there is a difference between us, they call us freshies, we call them BBCDS, British Born Confused Desīs [laughing].

Tensions exist in terms of migratory experience with the social field of the ‘established’ community existing alongside the social field of the ‘new’ or ‘freshie’ community of migrants in the city. These ‘freshies’, as Harris and Shaw (2009: 113) found, ‘tend to be educated and of higher social class, seeking to maintain rather than enhance their family status’. This explains some of the similarities found between the middle classes of ‘established’ Punjabis and ‘newcomer’ Pashtuns.
Frictions and intra-ethnic discrimination were commonly observed among the three groups studied in Newcastle. This was also apparent between the ‘established’ groups of the generally more economically successful Punjabis and the working-class Mirpuris who both settled in the UK in the 50s and 60s. For example, a focus group with three successful Punjabi businessmen who live in the most affluent area of Newcastle highlighted the tensions and divisions that have existed historically between these two ‘established’ groups:

Haroon: well historically we weren’t allowed to play with Mirpuris growing up, and Newcastle has one of the biggest Mirpuri communities in the UK, so really we were the black sheep of the community. So we cared about education but were disconnected from the larger community.

Shaz: Mirpuris are looked down on.

Sayed: From what I hear, I’ve heard a few negative comments about Mirpuris.

Haroon: At a time in my life I started associating with some Mirpuris and my mam was saying ‘what are you doing’. Less so Mirpuris have moved to the suburbs, I think it is a cultural thing, no disrespect to them, but I do feel that because Mirpur is a very poor place in Pakistan and the opportunities were very limited, let’s just say like the perception of North and South, like Londoners how they see Geordies, that is probably not dissimilar. Mirpuris stick together because of that.

Shaz: Well I visited Mirpur, we were travelling through to the Kashmir border and I was very surprised that there were villas everywhere, this is from English money, they are sitting empty, they have these fabulous villas built, sitting empty. I was talking to some teachers at a charity and they didn’t even have white boards in schools, and their relatives back in the UK have these palaces, but yet they don’t have white boards.

This social ranking between Punjabis and Mirpuris was starkly evident and was usually referred to in terms of a difference in educational achievement and attitudes towards education. As Jasmine, a Punjabi woman, explained:
It is the Kashmiris, Mirpuris, who are reluctant to educate, from what I know of. There is the resistance to change from the older generation, but generally the importance of caste and *izzat* is breaking down if you are educated.

A great deal of prejudice was placed on Mirpuris by all other respondents, and they have reacted, just as both Wardak (2000) and Kalra (2000) found, by strengthening certain common cultural bonds, which has also affected how they understand and act on *izzat*.

But is *izzat* breaking down among the ‘educated’? Positioned within the complex lines of differentiation among the diaspora our research found variations in cultural conceptualisations of *izzat* within and between groups, where Bourdieu’s ‘metaphors of capital’ (Skeggs, 1997) can be adopted to analyse its adaptability and exchangeability, primarily theorised as legitimated cultural and therefore symbolic capital. Firstly, an *objectified* understanding of *izzat*, which is found across groups but particularly among Mirpuris, whose means of displaying status symbolically is increasingly found in the luxury goods market. Secondly, among Punjabis and Pashtuns an *institutionalised* understanding is more apparent: educational qualifications play the most important role in status and recognition. Finally, an *embodied* understanding found in tribal and gendered codes of ethics, specifically among Pashtuns and Mirpuris. Gendered power relations featured heavily in accounts of *izzat* and is the focus of other work stemming from this research. Overall, *izzat* is displayed in various and fluctuating cultural forms. However, despite these important differences, the data revealed a common pattern that related *izzat* to wealth, material possessions and power, especially with regard to positions in the social hierarchy, economic and political power, and social and cultural capital, which can all be elevated once high *izzat* is gained and converted. It begged a number of questions: What is now the primary sign of high *izzat*? Is *izzat* beginning to be modified as the symbols of consumer capitalism became further internalised, adapted, legitimated and valued over time? Have consumer status symbols become more important to symbolic capital accumulation? How do these significations differ throughout a diverse transnational community?

**Consumer symbolism: transcending difference and producing transnational consumer subjects?**

Uzma, a working-class Mirpuri woman, reflected on the infiltration of consumerism among British Pakistanis in Newcastle:
It’s all changed. Ah yeah, they are totally westernised, even if you come from a strict family. It is all changing with society, media. I look at the girls today, they are so fashion conscious, they have to be perfect. It doesn’t matter what family background they come from, or whether they’re covered or not…You have to have a big house and drive a good car. My daughter likes Mini-Coopers, so she wants to get her own flat and a Mini-Cooper.

Uzma suggests that consumer capitalism transcends ‘background’ and has begun to homogenise culture across caste and social class. Perhaps in some circumstances the logics of consumer capitalism have begun to cut across and inform the intersections of social categories and *izzat* is beginning to be absorbed into a marketised and commodified culture. This supports Soni’s research, which, addressing *izzat* and young South Asians in Britain, found that one way of attaining, maintaining, or enhancing *izzat* is through ‘achievement’ in the material realm via wealth creation and conspicuous consumption (Soni, 2012). However, Uzma’s understanding of this as becoming ‘westernised’ overlooks the transnational reach of consumer symbolism, within Pakistan (Bolognani, 2014; Erdal, 2012; Wilson, 2006) and beyond. One way of understanding this is in response to an ‘imagined audience’ that is bound up with a ‘politics of class and ideas on modernity’ in Pakistan and its diaspora (Maqsood, 2017: 13). Returning to an earlier point, discussions often centred on those deemed more ‘modern’ or ‘backward’, with Mirpuri community members in particular situating themselves in relation to an audience made up of, on the one hand, ‘internal outsiders’ of fellow community members from more privileged positions on the social hierarchy and, on the other, ‘external outsiders’ of western liberals whose views of Pakistani culture were perceived as dominated by Islamophobic discourses on terrorism and religious violence (Maqsood, 2017: 88). Furthermore, by referring to covering in the context of fashion and consumption, Uzma highlights that despite there being little discussion of religion exclusively within this research, it nevertheless intersects in important ways to prefigure and shape notions of decency and distinction in Pakistani diasporic lives.

Generational differences were mentioned by many respondents as key to understanding these cultural shifts. Raj, a Mirpuri man, and devout Muslim, explained that the younger generation, rather than the pioneer generation, is becoming immersed in consumer culture:
I think the first generation worked immensely hard and you only bought a car if you needed it. But people have established themselves, you know… I think the younger generations get the stuff but don’t appreciate the hard work that got them there. They don’t understand the global economic situation and how lucky they are. They are basically standing on the shoulders of giants. A lot of the youth get caught up in the consumerism aspect and they aren’t understanding who they are as individuals. I think for some it can be that they attach a certain honour and respect to driving a certain car, they attach the status symbols to their identity.

Raj suggests the context in which the younger second generation adapt their symbolic and cultural capital in line with the demands of the consumer economy has further intensified, a process that is displacing some differentiated cultural forms and seeking out homologies in others. Supporting Bauman’s work on the consumer syndrome, Raj suggests that there is little reflection among the younger generations on skill, time or workmanship. Raj also discussed the role religion can play in challenging such instrumental consumerism. However, as touched on above, consumerism can also be part of the ascetic imperative/expression of piety for some Pakistani Muslims; a way of expressing Muslim identity in an Islamophobic world (Maqsood, 2017).

What became clear in many discussions is that this process of adaptation, which works at different speeds in different locations, is also rooted in caste and class-based dynamics. Higher caste and class respondents in Newcastle, such as Jasmine, a middle-class Punjabi, seemed to suggest that the ‘uneducated’ Mirpuris would feel a heightened need to display their wealth to the community in this way:

We were invited to a wedding from a Mirpuri family… and they invite the entire community, even if it means 400 to 500 guests!

The wedding was mentioned by several respondents as the ultimate theatrical way of attempting to show off ‘real’ or ‘perceived’ socio-economic success across the classes. Yet Jasmine viewed Mirpuris’ as ‘new money’, more focused on feeling the need to display their wealth, unlike the ‘educated’ classes who have inherited status. Bolognani’s research found something similar among Pakistanis in Bradford, where some young men become involved in crime as a means of ‘sharifisation’: an attempt via consumerism to acquire the status of those
of higher castes and classes (Bolognani, 2009: 141). Throughout our research, Mirpuris seemed unable to acquire the inherited, institutionalised symbolic and cultural capital of their counterparts, a deficit that relatively increases Punjabi’s *izzat* and legitimises their high status in the field of the ‘established community’. Despite diversity and change, already existing symbolic power seems to have the ability to remain dominant by selecting and modifying the values of the broad group to maintain its relative social position.

One of the Mirpuri respondents, a second-generation working-class woman in her twenties named Farzana, spoke about a divide among Pakistanis in her community, between those who are thrifty and those who are profligate:

You have half of them who never spend any money at all, and sons who give all their money to their parents. They’re really tight…it is proper crazy coz they have 9 million pounds and all they eat is chapattis [laughs]. But the reason they do that is they buy a huge mansion and let all their in-laws move in with them. It is all about keeping them close. The other half of the community is all about the money and the flashy cars… We have our cousin and uncle who own a taxi firm and that is what they go around like. It was the same with the guy I was supposed to marry. My Mam kept saying “look at him he has lots of money and a mansion, they even have a cleaner to come clean for them and their daughter’s room is full of Gucci, and she gets clothes imported in and their whole family’s *izzat* is so high”. And it is definitely to do with money. The luxury is so high. The women wear loads of gold… That is why people in the community couldn’t understand why I didn’t want to marry him. They thought someone had done black magic on me because he has six cars, his dad is an accountant, he is an accountant, they are sitting on a million minimum. Their weddings are different: they’ll start with a band from another country, the bride’s clothes imported in, the starters would be truffles or something. It is the perfect opportunity to show off their wealth and *izzat* and people lick their bum. People feel honoured they even speak to them.

It seems possible that the ascetic imperative in broad Pakistani culture is being gradually eroded by consumer culture to the extent that the restraints placed on conspicuous consumption are disappearing and the distinctions that once socially ranked the means of gaining wealth are declining in importance. However, once more, *izzat* is fluid and can still be recognised in various means of acquiring legitimate cultural capital. Some families remain committed to
traditions of prudence and saving, while others have become fully immersed in a consumer culture of instant gratification and waste. Farzana sees a division in terms of spending, whether it is saving to buy a big house or spending on a ‘flashy’ car or trainers. Both of her examples suggest a view of a monetarised and marketised conception of *izzat*. Whether the people she is talking about save money or spend a lot, the mention of consumerism and the ability to spend are significant to the accumulation of symbolic capital. The wedding as the ‘perfect opportunity to show off their wealth and *izzat*’ acts to symbolically elevate or recover an individual’s or family’s reputation and confirm their dominant position in their local and transnational social fields.

The focus group with Punjabi businessmen also highlighted the infiltration of consumerism and its links with *izzat*. Consumer symbolism in the form of expensive cars and grandiose wedding celebrations now inform signs of success and status, sometimes supplanting older forms of institutionalised cultural capital:

Shaz: There’s always been a status thing… here it might be a £200,000 car. When I was growing up your status in the community was “my son is a doctor”, “my son is at university” and I didn’t go to uni and my mam said “how am I going to hold my head up”. It was a stigma. In those days you make sure your sons, distinctly sons, were driven to be doctors and accountants.

AH: Was that about family honour, *izzat*?

H Haroon: Yeah, without a doubt and there is an element of that now.

Shaz: You couldn’t do anything if you stained your family’s honour, they couldn’t hold their head up in the community.

H Haroon: But I don’t think that is dissimilar to keeping up with the Jones’ here… I mean showmanship in India and the rest of the subcontinent has always been, you know, “my wedding has to be bigger and better than the next person’s wedding” and “I have to have more land than them” - I mean land was the currency back then.

AH: Is that the same here?
Haroon: God yeah, you should have seen Sayed’s wedding, it was ridiculous.

Sayed: Not as ridiculous as some I’ve been to. I do think there is a slight change though, maybe because of the economic climate, they have toned some weddings down slightly.

Shaz: Those with the cash and the status will still want to blow it.

Sayed: I know. I mean I was told about a guy in the North East who had 1000 invitations made costing 25 quid each. I thought it must have been a guy from London, but no, he was from here. That’s 25,000 quid just on invitations!

This focus group highlighted the circularity of marketised ideals in the transnational social field of the diaspora, where migration has not affected change in the functional interrelations between symbolic, cultural, and economic capital, but produced variants of the forms of capital themselves. These forms can move back and forth to influence the desires and cultural traits of individuals in a transnational community. Furthermore, it emphasises that it is not only the ‘less successful’ Mirpuris who feel the need to display their wealth at lavish wedding celebrations. The consumer syndrome is diffused across groups within the diaspora.

Our data suggest that global consumer capitalism sets a new macro context for forms of capital transnationally and these structural and cultural processes interact to shape and constitute social relations and identities. While Newcastle was deindustrialising, economic liberalisation caused by neoliberal restructuring was also changing Pakistan. As Khalid, a Punjabi, also explained when we asked him about consumer status symbols:

Oh yeah, but that is in Pakistan, it is not about moving here. Part of it is about the affordability factor, but obviously in most cases the more expensive the goods the better. If you’ve got something trendy, someone will say “oh that must’ve cost you a bomb”. Same with cars, back in the day the achievement level would be a Mercedes, but now you will see more young people are going for the BMWs or the big Range Rovers. My personal hate is that I would never buy a Mercedes because I associate it with people who only care about money and status symbols. Same that I wouldn’t buy a BMW. I have an Audi.
Thus, consumer symbolism has been circular in its influence, capable of affecting cultural practices throughout the UK and Pakistan as broad transnational processes drive narrow transnational social relations and imaginaries (Taylor, 2014). If symbolic capital accumulates from the individual’s ability to fulfil the social and cultural requirements that have the potential to display status and infer prestige, then buying an expensive car has this potential in a climate of conspicuous consumption. Having said that, whether commodities become legitimate symbols of success and respect in the wider transnational community is subject to variation across class and caste boundaries.

The circularity of consumer symbolism in the transnational social field was also reiterated by a focus group with new skilled migrants from Peshawar. Their experiences and conceptions of izzat were in certain respects different, yet they drew similarities in terms of the transnational influence of consumer culture on symbolic capital accumulation:

AH: Can izzat be reflected by economic success and status symbols?

Nadeem: It does affect it, both in Pakistan and here. A good car, a good house, kids going to a good university or college.

Abdullah: It is a fake type of izzat.

Bilal: If your kids are at university you are more respected, these are important things.

Abdullah: But if you show off at home about these things, this decreases your respect. If another person says it, it is OK, but not yourself.

Bilal: Some people are addicted to showing themselves in a certain way.

Nadeem: Same at the weddings and parties, they will talk about their shoes… expensive shoes, cuff links, shirts that cost 40,000 rupees, there is too much showing off in our country, same in India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, it is too much, the same everywhere.
Veblen’s (1994) classic theory of a network to spread word of a person or group’s ability to consume, waste and display status through conspicuous consumption can still be applied to some members of the Pakistani diaspora both at ‘home’ and ‘abroad’. Changes in izzat are evident. A ‘fake type of izzat’ refers to a form of symbolic and cultural capital that is in some ways beginning to be altered through a process of transnational neo-liberalisation and consumerism, and which is impacting on the means of displaying and perceiving honour and respect, something which has been central to Pakistani cultures and societies for centuries. In the view of this group of middle-class Pashtuns, those who are unable to tap into the resources to build up symbolic and cultural capital in the ‘traditional’ sense of izzat – reciprocity, caste, institutionalised cultural capital and inherited wealth and status – are more likely to seek and display this type of izzat. However, although this shifting form of izzat is regarded as a ‘fake’ by individuals who have inherited status and still retain a residual form of asceticism, it signifies the fluidity of izzat in a period of rapid transition. It could be argued that this does not necessarily signal a decline in piety or religious affiliation and that for some members of the diaspora is simply a way of expressing piety in a changing world. Either way, these competing notions continue to create classifications and boundaries around good taste, respect and social standing.

Previous research highlights that among South Asian transnational communities, symbolic legitimacy is characterised by education and ownership of professional skills, a thirst for consumer goods, and a smooth integration into the late-modern knowledge economy (Radhakrishnan, 2011; see also Werbner, 1990; Wilson, 2006). But, as Radhakrishnan (2011) also found with regard to India’s new middle classes, the symbolic privilege of the new transnational middle class is embedded in the privileged positions the generations held before them, reproducing forms of symbolic and cultural advantage and disadvantage (see also Kuldova, 2016). Particularly significant among the respondents interviewed for this research was the middle class’s discriminatory views of the lower classes and the tendency among the lower castes/classes to mimic the success of the middle and upper classes in a modified field where consumer symbolism acted to heighten personal honour and respect in the eyes of others. However, the lower castes/classes were unable to tap into the institutionalised modes of cultural and symbolic capital available to their higher-class counterparts, and often unable to legitimately access the same volume of economic capital. For example, within the ‘established community’, Punjabis often separated themselves from Mirpuris, who in their view were more prone to gambling and criminality. This was explained as an attempt to find more direct routes
to economic capital, which in a world of mass consumerism and commodification can be exchanged for the symbols of prestige found in the luxury goods market (Hall et al, 2008; see also Bolognani 2009: 98 on young Pakistanis in Bradford dealing drugs in order to acquire wealth and status through consumerism). But acquiring symbols of prestige was not less important to higher class Punjabis and new skilled Pashtuns. Across classes and ethno-cultural groups new modes of distinction are being reconfigured in relation to consumer symbolism.

**Conclusion**

Within the Pakistani transnational community studied in this paper, configurations of power, cultural symbolism, social relations, and opportunities to exchange varieties of capital are all in a process of flux in the adaptive context laid down by global consumer capitalism. The desire for material possessions highlights a shifting, but not entirely new, mode of cultural and symbolic capital, with consumerism playing a significant role in identity formation and cultural reproduction (Smart, 2010). Respondents in the research seemed to recognise in each other a nascent ‘fake type of izzat’ that differs significantly from what was referred to as the traditional form and seems to be more attuned to consumer culture. The conclusion we can draw is that izzat, a phenomenon which has been centrally embedded within Pakistani cultures and societies for centuries, is now being significantly shaped, and is shaping, global consumer culture. We have always known that izzat is fluid and adaptable, it can take on many forms and it exists in a dynamic relationship with other forms of capital accumulation and exchange. It is currently being reformed in both local and transnational social fields constituted and reproduced by consumer capitalism. Since neoliberalism and its attendant consumer culture has become doxa or common sense in politics and everyday socioeconomic life, it has had a formative effect on varieties of capital in the Bourdieusian sense: what we value, what we see as honourable, how we display our ‘success’ and how we perceive one another’s social worth. Therefore, the collective expectations and beliefs that legitimise capital as symbolic power are based within a broad circulatory neoliberal field which moves back and forth between Pakistan and the UK via the diaspora, social networks, and macro networks of knowledge production.

The research suggests that although conspicuous consumption transcends class and caste background and national boundaries – these consumption patterns and their attendant symbolic power are transnational and highly significant within Pakistan – it seemed to signify different things for different groups in Newcastle, emphasising the parallels and paradoxes of modern/traditional and producer/consumer continuums in Pakistan and the diaspora. For
Mirpuris, the symbols of conspicuous consumption signify their new success and achieved status, and an intensified commitment to an objectified form of cultural capital found in the luxury goods market. However, their higher caste and class counterparts – Punjabis and Pashtuns – still view Mirpuris as ‘new money’ and tend to present discriminatory views of them. Therefore, Mirpuris were unable to tap into the inherited modes of cultural and symbolic capital of their fellow community members. Yet among Punjabis and Pashtuns the significance of displaying consumer symbols of prestige and the desire to display izzat in an objectified state is also apparent, but as a way of signifying their continued success. This suggests the field for local symbolic prestige is in some respects a fusion of achieved and ascribed forms of capital, but with the capital of the higher classes and castes remaining more legitimate and symbolically resonant throughout the social structure. Therefore, various political, economic and cultural differences throughout the differentiated transnational community have been transformed into symbolic differences, with the added effect of creating and reproducing classifications and boundaries.

These boundaries and differences are in some respects being subsumed by neoliberal ideology and consumer culture, highlighting a dialectical relationship between contemporary forms of differentiation and similarity within the transnational community. However, consumer culture is not the exclusive site of symbolic and cultural distinction. As the data shows, inherited status and migratory histories still influence and divide the community. Pakistani diasporic lives are also bound up with the politico-cultural context of religion and belonging. Yet late-modern consumer symbolism and systems of social class are also prominent in both the UK and Pakistan. These divergent social and symbolic ordering systems are both active and involved in a process of elective affinity as they operate in the transnational context.

Currently, izzat is mutating in the context of consumer culture, which compels us to theorise the complex interaction and circular impact of consumer capitalism on norms, values, beliefs and the legitimation and exchangeability of capital in specific contexts inextricably linked to power relations. This combination of cultural fluidity and structural political economy interact to constitute and reproduce the social order. Among Newcastle’s diverse Pakistani diaspora, izzat and the honour and shame complex is fluid and constantly adapting to the context of global consumer capitalism to further interests and the exercise of power on different levels, and in different locations, of the transnational social and political structure. How these complex
and often contradictory dynamics continue to play out and reshape Pakistani cultures and sensibilities in the future is worthy of further social scientific study.

References


