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# *Social Imaginary of the Hijras: Dominant Cultural Narratives Mediating Ritualistic Consumption of Transgender and Gender Non-Binary Consumers in Bangladesh*

Hossain Shahriar

**Abstract**— This research interrogates ritualistic consumption of hijras, Transgender and Gender Non-Binary individuals in Bangladesh, manifested in a perpetual negotiation of ideologies, myths, religion, politico-legal and sociocultural imperatives. The study enacts social imaginaries of hijras to animate how hijras are oppressed but occasionally granted peripheral inclusion, journey through a liminal rite of passage into *communitas* and co-opt hegemonic ritualistic consumption, and has been relegated from being viewed in the trope of purity to pollution. The study contributes to prior CCT theories on marginalisation/stigmatisation and literature on intersectionality of gender.

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## INTRODUCTION

*A pair of hijras walked into an eatery in Dhaka during peak iftar (Islamic ritual of breaking fast in Ramadan) hours and brooked some awkward glances. Suddenly two people confronted them to leave. But then something remarkable happened – guests across diverse demographic jumped to defend the hijras' right to dine.* Turned out, it was a social experiment by a brand that sparked social media conversation across Bangladesh about the rights of *hijras*, a marginalised community prevented from access to such ritualistic consumption.

Scholars in Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) have looked into disenfranchisement and stigmatisation of consumers on the fringe, such as immigrants (Luedicke, 2015; Peñaloza, 1994; Üstüner & Holt, 2007), sexual minorities (Kates, 2002; Peñaloza, 1996; Visconti, 2008) and racial/ethnic/religious groups (Askegaard, Arnould, & Kjeldgaard, 2005; Crockett, 2017; Rinaldo, Maclaran, & Stevens, 2016). Previous CCT studies have also looked into the role of political (Crockett & Wallendorf, 2004; Varman & Belk, 2009) and religious (O'Guinn & Belk, 1989; Sandıkcı & Ger, 2010) ideologies in structuring consumption, in particular, how ideologies confluence with myths (Luedicke, Thompson, & Giesler, 2010; Thompson, 2004) and religion (Izberk-Bilgin,

2012a; Jafari & Goulding, 2008). Izberk-Bilgin (2012b), singularly, depicted how religious myths, ideologies, politics, globalisation and historical conflicts reproduce consumer culture in an Islamic LIC (Less Industrialised Country) as consumers perceive themselves as marginalised on a global, political and religious level, as committed Muslims.

This research explores ritualistic consumption of Transgender and Gender Non-Binary (TGNB) individuals, in the nexus of ideologies, myth, religion, politico-legal and sociocultural context of Bangladesh, an Islamic LIC. Although scholarships in other disciplines have investigated how hijra subjectivities are constructed and reproduced (Cohen, 1995; Hall, 1997; Nanda, 1990), there is a dearth of studies in CCT that explore TGNB consumption from an Eastern viewpoint at the intersection (Gopaldas & Fischer, 2012) of gender, religion, ideology, myths and politics, where, in turn, this research aims to contribute.

## CONTEXTUALISING CONTESTING CONTEXT OF TGNB CONSUMPTION COMMUNITIES

*Hijras*, Transgender and Gender Non-Binary individuals (TGNB) in Bangladesh – popularly known as eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transvestites and transsexuals – are intersex or male-bodied individuals but identify as female (Hossain, 2017). Drawing upon ancient myths and historical narratives can help

contextualising the context (Askegaard & Linnet, 2011) of hijra communities to understand contesting sociocultural norms, religious myths and politico-legal imperatives structuring their consumption. In 2013 Bangladesh became one of the few countries in the world to officially recognise hijras, permitting them the use of third-gender in identity documents/passports, to vote and run for office (McNabb, 2018). This politico-legal recognition conflicts with religious ideologies, which, to a large extent, govern politics in Bangladesh. With over 90% Muslims and emergence of intolerant values, homosexuality is shunned and condemned. Hijras uphold their Islamic beliefs but concurrently engage in Hindu myths, rites and practices (Hossain, 2012), pushing the religious envelope. Hijras lack cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984), as they are rejected by families and forced to live in destitution, working as prostitutes or beggars and their sacred rituals of *badhai* (playing tom-toms to confer blessings on new-borns in exchange of gifts) and *birit* (alms collection in the marketplace) (Hossain, 2012) have become a violence of holding people hostage over money.

#### METHODOLOGY

This research investigates the aforesaid social experiment in online and offline communities through (1) netnography (Kozinets, 2002, 2019) to observe discussions in four Bangladeshi Facebook groups about the social experiment, and (2) face-to-face interviews with six urban middle-class Bangladeshi to understand hijras' access to ritualistic consumption. Interviews were semi-structured, lasting from 60-120 minutes, and were supplemented with field notes.

#### DOMINANT CULTURAL NARRATIVES

Dominant cultural narratives are deep-seated stories and social practices, ingrained in our cultural configuration that are enacted through normative interactions and social institutions (Ewick & Silbey, 1995; Rappaport, 2000). As contextual contradictions unfold three cultural narratives manifest from the empirical materials, that mediate hijras' access to ritualistic consumption.

##### *B. Oppression and Inclusion Narratives*

Oppression narratives employ normalised cisgender gaze to paint TGNB individuals sympathetically with pity, as an outgroup, rather than empathising with and including them in the cultural constructions of "us" (Green, Hoskin, Mayo, & Miller, 2019). As marginalised consumers seeking inclusion, hijras encounter exclusionary pressures such as fear of unknown, inhibiting their access to ritualistic consumption. But respondents also revealed exclusion on religious grounds is attenuating as Islamic leaders are asserting hijras as creations of God and their emasculation is deemed analogous with circumcision as well as a cure for homosexuality, granting them peripheral inclusion in certain ritualistic consumption.

##### *C. Stigma and Communitas Narratives*

Goffman (1963) postulated stigma as a 'deeply discrediting attribute' on three echelons, all of which applies to hijras – bodily abomination (genetically at fault), character blemishes (deviant sexual tendencies) and tribal stigma (damaging attributes). In a country where sex/sexuality is taboo, hijras are viewed in the trope of blight and disability (Hossain, 2017) and

such misconceptions breed stigma. These institutionalised stigma narratives (Bradford & Clark, 2011) are used to score political currency by showcasing TGNB initiatives to activists and concomitantly flaunting, to the mass, attempts to alleviate violence on the streets. Abandoned by their families, hijras live in a *communitas*, which Turner (1969, p. 96) explicated as a rudimentarily structured society, led by a *guru*, that emanates in the *liminal* period with "relatively undifferentiated comitatus, community, or even communion of equal individuals". As with other tribes, hijras go through *nirvan*, a liminal initiation rite of passage into the *communitas* through the removal of male genitals, scrotum and testicles. As a counterculture (Hebdige, 1979), hijras use their collective identity to subvert and resist stigma and internalise or appropriate hegemonic ritualistic consumption, such as *shinni* (feeding the underprivileged after completing the Qur'an) with their own rendition.

##### *D. Mythical and Religious Narratives*

The reverence of androgyny in the Indian subcontinent stems from ancient Hindu mythology, which accorded hijras power and status, analogous with their ritual sacrifice of emasculation (Nanda, 1990). Hinduism regarded hijras as touched by God, who bring luck and bestow blessings. With the rise of Islam during the Mughal Empire, hijras were reduced to 'eunuch slaves' and *harem* guards, followed by criminalisation during British colonisation (Nanda, 1990; Taparia, 2011). Drawing on rituals of 'purity' and 'pollution' by Douglas (1966), this research found that respondents frequently use rhetoric of 'God's curse' to emphasise the contamination and lack of purity of hijras, who are looked down as trouble that threatens to destabilise the social gender order built on the hallowed grounds of binary gender codes. The relegation of social status of TGNB consumers from sacred to profane (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry Jr., 1989) is the fundamental impediment inhibiting unholy hijras to access Islamic holy ritualistic consumption, like iftar.

#### CONCLUSION

According to Taylor (2004), social imaginaries are a broad understanding of how people imagine their social existence. This research helps us navigate the dominant cultural narratives of hijras in Bangladesh, which are social imaginaries of hijras constructed from a hegemonic non-hijra viewpoint. This study renders an understanding on how these imaginaries structure ritualistic consumption of TGNB consumers, manifested in a perpetual negotiation of myths, religion, ideologies and politics. This research advances our theoretical understanding by animating how brands and consumer change agents pose historical challenges to the gender binary and how ideological change efforts are inflected. While this study is from a past-present social imaginary vantage point, the findings also indicate waning influences of religious ideologies mediating TGNB consumption in an Islamic LIC, where religion is still used as a major impediment of access to ritualistic consumption for women and homosexuals. Future researchers can explore how TGNB consumption is constituted in this fragmentation of gender/sexuality and religion.

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