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# Post-Colonial Consumer Respect and the Framing of Neocolonial Consumption in Advertising

ROHIT VARMAN   
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This study of the production, representation, and reception of post-colonial advertising in India reveals a politics of consumer respectability. The post-colonial politics of consumer respectability is located at the intersection of center–periphery relations, class divisions, and colorism in a way that it frames neocolonial consumption. Advertisers depict middle-class consumer respectability by asserting Indian nationalism and by degrading the West as a symbol of colonialism. Such depictions are class- and color-based and show under-class and dark-skinned consumers in subordinate positions. Furthering such neocolonial frames of consumption, Indian advertising advances the middle-class desire for Eurocentric modernity by reinforcing the colonial trope of India as temporally lagging behind the West. Finally, middle-class consumer respectability involves a neocolonial whitening of self with epidermalized shaping of inter-corporeality and agency. In uncovering the theoretical implications of advertising as a site of avenging degradation, desiring modernity, and whitening of self, this study contributes by offering insights into how the politics of post-colonial consumer respectability furthers neocolonial frames of consumption.

**Keywords:** respectability, neocolonial consumption, post-colonial, framing, colorism, whiteness

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Several consumer researchers have interrogated the ongoing role of the West in the reproduction of colonialism (Arnould 1989; Cayla and Peñaloza 2011; Costa 1998; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006; Wilk 1995) and have drawn attention to degrading racialized hierarchies as vestiges of colonial relations (Bonsu 2009; Crockett 2008, 2017, 2022; Crockett and Grier 2021; Varman and Costa 2013). Consumer researchers have also theorized resistance to colonial domination (Dong and Tian 2009; Ger and Belk 1996; Izberk-Bilgin 2012; Varman and Belk 2009, 2012). Despite offering these important insights, past writings have under-examined how colonial relations of oppression that robbed the colonized of respect (Glover 2012; Joshi 2016; Mbembe 2001; Nandy 1983; Panikkar 2007), which continue to perpetuate in the post-colonial world in novel forms (Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2007), shape the politics of consumer respectability in the Global South. Building on Crockett (2017), we interpret the post-colonial

politics of consumer respectability as a contested disavowal of colonial degradation, through consumption. More specifically, our attention to the contested disavowal of degradation helps us focus on the under-examined question of how the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability in advertising frames neocolonial consumption in the Global South.

We borrow from [Snow and Benford \(1988, 198\)](#) to understand framing as “signifying work” through which meanings are assigned. Frames orient and guide interpretation of individual experience ([Oliver and Johnston 2000](#)) by creating a shared social reality ([Humphreys and LaTour 2013](#)). Framing is central to the creation of meaning from any communication ([Humphreys 2010; Snow and Benford 1988](#)). Advertising frames mobilize consumers through signifying practices that help them to interpret their consumption experiences. Frames direct attention, and help consumers learn or change the way they interpret an issue by influencing its social acceptability ([Humphreys and LaTour 2013](#)). Advertising frames of neocolonial consumption encode consumer goods or services with colonial power relations and domination by a local elite. [Nkrumah \(1966, ix\)](#) describes neocolonialism as a condition in which “the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty. In reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.” The aim of neocolonialists is economic domination and exploitation. But they do not confine their operations to the economic sphere. They also use the political and cultural spheres to further their domination. Neocolonialists are not confined to Western elites and corporations. They also include local elites and their institutions in post-colonial societies ([Nkrumah 1966; Quijano 2007](#)). While [Nkrumah \(1966\)](#) and others ([Mignolo and Walsh 2018; Quijano 2007](#)) help to comprehend several features of neocolonialism, we understand little about how neocolonialism manifests in the politics of consumer respectability. In particular, we have limited insights on the role of advertising in furthering the politics of consumer respectability. This lacuna prompts us to ask—how does advertising in the Global South engage with the politics of consumer respectability to frame neocolonial consumption?

We situate our research question in Indian advertising’s engagement with the West. In doing so, we study production and representation by advertisers, and their reception by middle-class consumers. Indian post-colonial advertising is a fertile ground to study the politics of consumer respectability because of its persistent engagements with colonial degradation and the West. Our analysis leans on various writings that examine colonialism and its newer avatars ([Bhabha 1994; Chatterjee 1997; Du Bois 1903; Fanon 1952, 1963; Nkrumah 1966; Quijano 2007; Spivak 1996](#)). We borrow from anti-, post-, de-, and neo-colonial perspectives (for simplicity, and acknowledging several divisions among them, we label these as theorizations of

colonialism). Theorizations of colonialism are part of an anti-imperialist discourse that interrogates empire and its persistent legacies, and critiques conventional theories for the ways they cultivate knowledge about the colonized ([Go 2016](#)). These theorizations also draw attention to how colonialism inaugurates specific forms of degradation that further the colonizer’s invention of modernity and whiteness to legitimize the dehumanization and exploitation of people with darker skins ([Burton 2009; Coulthard 2014; Mbembe 2001](#)).

In post-colonial Indian advertising, we witness a politics of consumer respectability that is located at the intersection of center–periphery relations, class divisions, and colorism in such a manner that it frames neocolonial consumption. On the one hand, there is a middle-class desire to find respectability by avenging degradation or asserting Indian nationalism by degrading the West as a symbol of colonialism. Such advertising depictions are class- and color-based and fix the positions of under-class and dark-skinned consumers as subordinate. Notwithstanding avenging degradations of the West, Indian advertising furthers the middle-class desire for Eurocentric modernity by reinforcing the colonial trope of India as temporally lagging behind the West. Hence, Indian advertising frames a contradictory double consciousness that furthers neocolonial consumption. In the context of Indian advertising, to borrow from [Du Bois \(2003\)](#), double consciousness resulting from colonial degradation is marked by the conflicting desire to find an alternative to the colonizer’s way of life accompanied by a contradictory aspiration to become like the colonizer. Finally, Indian advertising also propagates whiteness as a superior attribute to being dark and “Indian” ([Derné 2008](#)). As a result, middle-class consumer respectability entails a neocolonial whitening of self with epidermalized shaping of inter-corporeality and agency. In uncovering the theoretical implications of advertising as a site of avenging degradation, desiring modernity, and whitening of self, our study contributes by offering an understanding of the framing of neocolonial consumption within the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability.

In sum, our aim is to examine the framing of neocolonial consumption within the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability as a structure that contributes important new insights to the growing pool of research on consumer cultures of the Global South. In doing so, we take up [Grier, Thomas, and Johnson’s](#) urging (2019, 7) that consumer researchers examine the “realities of racism and social stratification in key institutional processes” that might otherwise be normalized in the global circulation of images, ideas, technologies, goods, and people.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Colonial hierarchies continue to influence the politics of consumer respectability in the post-colonial world. Two

key features highlighted by past research are relevant to this study: 1) the dominance of the West and racialized consumer hierarchies; and 2) resistance to and rejection of the West. We elaborate on each of these themes and deploy theorizations of colonialism to point to some key limitations in the past writings.

### The Dominance of the West and Racialized Consumer Hierarchies

Past research points to how Western dominance continues in non-western consumer cultures in different forms to shape quests for dignity and status. Research shows that consumers use Western consumer goods to articulate local status distinctions (Batra et al. 2000; Miller 1995; Orlove and Bauer 1997). In an early study in Niger, Arnould (1989) suggested that Western symbols get coopted into local consumption patterns in this way. Üstüner and Holt (2010) demonstrate that Turkish high cultural capital consumers use Western lifestyles to distinguish themselves from low cultural capital consumers whom they label as the premodern local. Tian and Dong (2011) and Zhou and Belk (2004) suggest that China's consumers also adopt Western brands as signifiers of higher status, despite that country's love-hate relationship with the West. While consumers in colonized societies have some agency to alter and establish status hierarchies, as Schler (2003) documents in the case of Cameroon, consumers are also constrained in their acquisitions of higher status goods by colonial relations. Delving further into constraints, Kravets and Sandikci (2014) theorize a cautious cosmopolitanism of middle-class Turkish consumers as formulaic creativity to highlight the role of personal qualities while being located in a transitioning socio-economic context.

The continued domination of the West in post-colonial consumer cultures is characterized by subtleties such as fusions and reflexive adaptations. For example, Wilk's (1995, 118) work is important here in suggesting that globalization diffuses "particular kinds of diversity while submerging, deflating or suppressing others." Globalization here is a euphemism for Western domination. Accordingly, post-colonial traditions get reflexively refashioned with reference to images and experiences of the West (Wilk 1999). Consistent with Wilk's insights, in their study of youth culture, Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006) demonstrate glocalization of three structures of common difference—identity, center-periphery, and reference to youth cultural consumption styles. They further show how a global model of market-mediated youth identity is diffusing to and being reflexively transformed by young post-colonial Greenlanders. Accordingly, the cultural resources available for the construction of identity projects are not just reliant on internal class-based resources but draw as much on the center-periphery context that shapes their

experiences of deprivation based on distance from the metropole.

In the Indian context, studying production and representation in advertising, Mazzarella (2003) argues that ads for Kama Sutra condoms reflected a shift toward a Western consumerist ethos privileging individual consumer choice and pleasure, using an Indian religious motif (the Kama Sutra) to bypass taboos against sexualized ads. Further, Cayla and Eckhardt (2008) suggest that brand managers and creatives in Asia synthesize cultural referents from the East and the West to fashion a transnational Asian modernity set apart from the West. Moreover, Cayla and Peñaloza (2011), examining the production of advertising, show how Indian advertisers disseminate Western equations of consumerism, hierarchy, and progress. Despite these insights, a key limitation of this consumer research is the lack of a more explicit engagement with the *degradation* of non-Westerners as a persistent outcome of colonialism.

Research that critically engages with Western advertising representations offers a more explicit reading of the degradations of non-Westerners. A recurring theme in this body of work is the examination of how advertisers deploy racist tropes to represent the non-Western "Other" as exotic and primitive, barbaric and unruly in mass media advertising and promotional material (Bonsu 2009; Burke 1996; Costa 1998; McClintock 1995; Ramamurthy 2003; Varman and Costa 2013). For example, Western advertising representations cast Indians as being "at a different stage in the evolutionary process" (Ramamurthy 2003, 104–105). Further, Bonsu (2009) has shown that the colonial tropes of savagery and exotica still inform representations of Africa in North American advertising. Marketing representations continue to reinforce a global hierarchy of races, cultures, and nations (Bonsu 2009; Varman and Costa 2013). In labeling advertising as "the poetry of imperialism," Ramamurthy (2003, 209) insightfully adds that advertisers further neocolonialism by showing Western corporations as benign and necessary for modernizing former colonies.

Another body of work that foregrounds degradation deploys critical race theory to cast in sharp relief the issues of whiteness and racism in marketing (Crockett and Grier 2021; Grier and Poole 2020; Johnson et al. 2019; Rosa-Salas and Sobande 2022). Related work draws attention to the role of markets and corporations in furthering racism and colonial relations (Crockett 2008, 2017; Davis 2018; Grier, Thomas, and Johnson 2019). In an important work that informs this research, Crockett (2017) uncovers the enactment of racial uplift ideology through the strategies of normative and oppositional respectability by Black middle-class consumers in the US to overcome racist stigma. Offering an intersectional analysis, he points to class-based contradictions within the racialized politics of consumer respectability. Elsewhere, Crockett (2008) dissects corporate aesthetics to show how the deployment of blackness in



the US advertising, instead of creating racial equality, furthers inequality and privileges of whiteness. In another instance, examining the role of Western corporations in marketing skin whitening products in India and Nigeria, Vijaya (2019, 234) points sharply to “the perpetuation of the exploitative economic relationships between White colonial nations and their former colonies through covert corporate influences.” As our research emphasizes, such racialized contradictions and perpetuations are a central feature of post-colonial advertising and require further scrutiny.

While studies that have examined the roles of racism and whiteness in shaping degrading consumer hierarchies inform our work, there is a neglect in these writings of racial epidermal schema that arises from such degradations. A racial epidermal schema is the embodiment of racial oppression that fixes an individual’s corporeality and limits the possibility of being and experiencing the world (Fanon 1952). In a famous passage in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon (1952, 93) shares the following conversation when on sighting him on a train, a young white boy anxiously complains to his white mother, “Look, a negro! Maman, a Negro!” His mother after cautioning the boy, “Shh! You will make him angry,” tells Fanon, “don’t pay attention to him, monsieur, he doesn’t realize you’re just as civilized as we are.” This is an important illustration of degradation and racialization that are of relevance for our study. The young boy injuriously interpellates a dark-skinned person as an object that is simultaneously inferior and loathsome (Fanon 1952). We see degradation in the racist responses of fear and anxiety by the white boy that fixes the position of the black man as a source of danger and aversion. The mother’s apology for her son’s behavior does not challenge the injurious interpellation and ontological wounding but further reinforces the degradation by allowing a dark-skinned person to be patronizingly recognized as being “as civilized as we are.” And Fanon (1952, 93) incisively writes, “My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter’s day.” Indeed, Fanon (1952) claims that it is the colonizer who secures unfettered access to subjectivity and fixes the colonized to the state of being degraded objects. Fanon’s reading of racial epidermal schema helps us to attend to how post-colonial advertising through degrading representations color codes and interpellates different subject positions within the politics of consumer respectability.

Colonial degradation has been documented by several other scholars as well. For example, Glover (2012) shows how humiliation in colonial India furthered British atrocities and the master–slave hierarchy. In such degradation, we witness what Lukes (1997, 44) describes as “ascriptive humiliation” in which statuses are pre-assigned to people and discriminations become natural and normal. Similarly, Mbembe (2001) laments that in colonial representations

the colonized were either deemed as things that did not have life or degraded as savages and animals. Such humiliating colonial representations produced a negation in which the colonized became the antithesis of what was considered requisite to be recognized as human. Therefore, to be degraded is to be made into an inferior being in a deliberate and destructive manner (Margalit 1996). For Margalit (1996), degradation is injury to a person’s self-respect and creates what West (2000) describes as ontological wounds. Such wounds rob the colonized of human dignity and respect.

As a result of such degradations, Fanon (1952) contends that colonialism altered the very basis of bodily intentionality or bodily schema for the colonized. In this reading, Fanon (1952) begins to offer a corrective to Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) phenomenology of the body. For Fanon, Merleau-Ponty’s universal rendering of the corporeal schema does not account for colonialism and the experiences of the colonized. In Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) reading of the bodily schema, the whole body of a person, with all its sensory, motor, and affective operations, is that through which the world appears. Accordingly, embodied existence and its relationship with the world are such that we are attuned to the world and adjust ourselves non-cognitively to its directives (see also, Mauss 1973 on habitus and techniques of the body). In Fanon’s reading, inter-corporeality is subject to forms of racial differentiation and discrimination. Accordingly, although Whites are free to adjust their bodies, dark-skinned people are severely restricted in bodily responses. For example, while Whites can decide to lean forward, establish eye contact, come close, or touch the dark-skinned, a dark-skinned person cannot reciprocate at will. What was an ordinary, non-cognitive bodily adjustment becomes for the dark-skinned a movement that must be scrutinized from as many perspectives as possible, lest the “wrong” move cost them their lives (Nielsen 2011). Thus, inter-corporeality of the dark-skinned was scrutinized constantly so as not to overstep the boundaries of existence. A bodily schema is neither a purely mental nor a merely physiological state; it is about bodily skills and capacities that shape our awareness of objects (Carman 1999). According to Fanon (1952), the bodily schema is subtended by a racial-epidermal schema because the dark-skinned are forced to see themselves through the colonizers’ eyes using the colonizer’s narratives of skin color. Our attention to Fanon’s reading of epidermal schema helps to see how post-colonial advertising in India fixes a subordinate agency and inter-corporeality that limits the possibility of being and experiencing the world for such consumers.

In summary, in theorizing different facets of Western domination, several consumer researchers under-examine how colonial degradation and the quest for respectability influence post-colonial consumption. The scholarship on racism and whiteness as specific legacies of colonialism or

slavery offers a correction to this oversight. This body of work, however, neglects how degradations contribute to a racial epidermal schema that continues to play a role in post-colonial consumer cultures. Hence, a key question that emerges for our research from this review is: What are the roles of degradation and resulting racialized epidermal schema in advertising and how do they contribute to neo-colonial consumption?

### Resistance to and Rejection of the West

In a body of work that modifies the domination and racialization theses, research finds that non-Western consumers at times resist and even reject the West as a signifier of respectability precisely because it is seen as a symbol of imperialism. A good exemplar of such an interpretation in this outlet is [Dong and Tian \(2009\)](#). While identifying Western brands as signifiers of status in China, they point to a counter-discourse of resistance in which the popularity of the local brands is equated with restoration of Chinese pride and a reversal, imagining a subjugation of the West. Similarly, in [Izberk-Bilgin \(2012, 665\)](#), the resistance of Turkish informants to the influx of global brands represents a recognition of inferior Western morality and is derived from a respect for the “Golden Age of Islam.” Accordingly, lower class consumers deploy the tyranny discourse to construe the Muslim consumer as victimized by infidel brands that have Western origins.

Elsewhere, [Varman and Belk \(2009\)](#) observe that the *Swadeshi* movement in India, a discourse of self-reliance dating back to India’s anti-colonial struggle against British rule in the early twentieth century, continues to frame the resistance of Indian activists against global companies. While observing resistance to globalization in the “Less Affluent World” due to the production of inequalities, class polarizations, stress, and materialism, [Ger and Belk \(1996\)](#) also point to return to roots, local appropriation of global goods, and creolization as alternatives. In emphasizing creolization as the most realistic alternative, they draw attention to how it is a dialectic of adoption and resistance of the global together with local hegemonies. But this is more an act of accommodation than resistance.

While this body of consumer research helps to see ambivalent resistance to domination by the West, past studies largely ignore the subjectivity of a colonized consumer split by a double consciousness as both a self that is ontologically injured and one not willing to accept injuries. As [Du Bois \(1903\)](#) astutely observes, the double consciousness of the colonized emerges in response to degradation. Double consciousness produces for the colonized a sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the colonial master. [Du Bois \(1903, 2\)](#) insightfully interprets “double consciousness” in those who were enslaved as a:

... sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness. ...two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.

A double consciousness fractures the colonized consciousness into two irreconcilable parts. It leaves the colonized with the reactionary desire to be like the colonizer but also to assert their independent identities in order to reclaim their personhood. [Du Bois \(1903, 136\)](#) goes on to say, “this must produce a peculiar wrenching of the soul, a peculiar sense of doubt and bewilderment.” As a result, the colonized are unable to achieve a unity of self and their self-consciousness is thwarted. [Du Bois](#) further points out that, on the one hand, the colonized internalize white ideologies and constantly feel dislocated from themselves. Indeed, the oppressed become clones of the oppressor with a sense of self-denigration ([Fanon 1952](#)). This leads to the colonized endorsing ideologies that are repressive to their own group. On the other hand, the colonized refuse to accept the colonizer’s codes of domination and create subversive and unique aspects of their identities that are outside the colonizer’s dominance. For instance, [Du Bois \(1903\)](#) informs us about attempts to restore Black subjectivity by emphasizing African spirituality as a counterpoint to white materialism. This was strategic essentialism as pointed out by [Spivak \(1996\)](#). Strategic essentialism is about provisionally accepting essentialist foundations for identity in order to collectively pursue resistance against domination. Given the historical experience of colonial degradation in India, it becomes necessary to pay attention to the roles of double consciousness and strategic essentialism in shaping the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability in advertising frames.

Hence, although consumer research shows that the domination of the West in non-Western consumer cultures is resisted and subverted in multiple ways, there is a neglect of split colonial subjectivity that [Du Bois](#) points to in his articulation of the concept of double consciousness. Moreover, there is a lack of understanding in consumer research of how strategic essentialism shapes consumption as part of double consciousness. Therefore, a key question that emerges for this research as derived in the review is: how do double consciousness, strategic essentialism, and racial epidermal schema that result from degradation shape a post-colonial politics of consumer respectability which frames neocolonial consumption in advertising?

In summary, despite some attention to post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, consumer research has under-examined certain key features. We draw on theorizations of colonialism to foreground the significance of double consciousness, strategic essentialism, and racial epidermal schema. These perspectives have not been sufficiently utilized to understand how new forms of

colonialism shape contemporary discourses of advertising and consumption in the Global South. As a result, the important issue of the framing of neocolonial consumption within post-colonial politics of consumer respectability remains neglected. In the following sections, we offer a corrective by analyzing advertising in India to uncover neocolonial framing of consumption.

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND AND METHODS

### Research Background

India's encounter with European colonialism started with Portuguese trade and the subsequent capture of trading posts such as Goa in 1510 (Malekandathil 2009). This initial encounter was limited to port cities and trade routes. We can consider as the formal beginnings of British colonization the battle of Plassey in 1757, and the capture of Bengal by the British East India Company (Dalrymple 2019; Robins 2006). The economic consequences appear to have been almost immediate. The British acquisition of the Bengal treasury was quickly followed by one of the worst famines in India's history—the Bengal famine of 1770 that killed an estimated 10 million people (Robins 2006). Scholars have attributed the increase in famines during this period to the indifference of the colonial administration to local needs, ruthless taxation, and the opening up of Indian markets with scarce regard for local economic conditions (Heath 2021). Colonial policies further marginalized the poor and contributed to unprecedented miseries for this section of the population. Further, as Mukherjee (2022) notes, Indian economic interests and domestic requirements were made subservient to imperial demands, eventually creating a drain of wealth that some estimate to be around 45 trillion USD (Patnaik and Patnaik 2016). Thus, it is clear that the colonial encounter contributed to economic degradation of India and led to impoverishment in the country.

Colonial degradation was not just confined to the economic domain and also included social oppression. As Said (1978) points out in his classic work, the Orientalist attitudes of colonizers fetishize and essentialize the East, including colonies such as India. Western racial science further lent a material dimension to such fetishization, with the very bodies of Indians getting othered by the British to produce “a science of race” (Prakash 1992). In their attempts to classify, name, and understand, the British adopted ostensibly neutral scientific practices, as part of the discourses and prejudices inherent in the colonial project. For example, Ray (2013) points to the British portrayals of the Bengalis as relatively weaker men. Such portrayals caused much anxiety among the Bengali intelligentsia, with some even advocating the consumption of meat to strengthen the body. As Chatterjee (1997) laments,

the colonial encounter rendered Indians powerless to invent their own modernity and condemned them to perpetually be consumers of modernity. As a result, India was relegated to what Chakrabarty (2000) famously referred to as the waiting room of history.

Scholars such as Bhabha (1994), although limiting their analyses to upper classes in India, have pointed to the notion of fixity in colonial discourse, wherein the racialized other is seen as at once unchanging and fixed, while also degenerate and disorderly. It is not surprising that such stereotyping resulted in deep-rooted anxieties and a sense of humiliation among Indians (Panikkar 2007). As Nandy (1983) suggests, an assumption of degradation of the colonized was implicit within the colonial project itself. Accordingly, Indian civilization and its achievements were explained away by relegating them to a past which was dead by the time of the colonial encounter. Panikkar (2007) sharply adds that British colonialism denied history to the colonized Indians and deprived them of their cultural rights and identity. The Indian middle-class was particularly singled out for comparisons with its Western counterparts, and was labelled as “inauthentic” (Joshi 2016, 85). Moreover, this degradation was supposedly not caused by colonial rule, but rather by the irrational elements in India's own culture which contained within them the seeds of its downfall (Nandy 1983). From these writings, it is clear that apart from economic extraction, racism and degradation are not merely byproducts, but the main effects of colonialism. Such violence resulted in ontological wounds that lasted long after the colonial encounter and persist even in post-colonial nationhood (Chatterjee 1997; Joshi 2016).

### Methodology

Our methods focus on three critical moments of cultural production that Du Gay (1997) describes as the “circuit of culture”: (1) the representations of the West in advertisements; (2) the production of advertisements evoking the West; and (3) the reception by Indian consumers of advertisements evoking the West. The varied classes of data we draw from helped us comprehensively examine the framing of neocolonial consumption within the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability.

*Representation and Production.* In order to study production and representation in post-colonial advertising, we interviewed and observed creatives and managers in ad agencies in Delhi and Kolkata, which are two major centers for advertising in India. The profiles of the executives we interviewed are provided in table 1 in the web appendix. Our work has similarities to the comprehensive studies of Indian advertising agencies carried out by Mazzarella (2003) and Cayla and Elson (2012). As in these studies, we view advertising as an institution that interfaces between



the Global South and the West. Moreover, as pointed out by Mazzarella (2003), Indian advertising production is riddled with the anxieties, compromises, and contradictions that are characteristic of a capitalist enterprise in a post-colonial setting. Advertising creatives work with the often-conflicting pulls of clients who wish to sell products, and consumers who seek authenticity and novel experiences, while simultaneously trying to protect their own interests as cultural intermediaries and professionals (Mazzarella 2003).

Drawing on theorizations of colonialism, we see advertising as a context that is political, economic, and cultural. As such it helps to understand neocolonial relations of domination (Ramamurthy 2003). The first author conducted interviews in three ad agencies in New Delhi and interviewed a marketing manager, who was a client of these advertising firms. The third author conducted interviews and observations in three ad agencies in Kolkata.

While we interviewed ad executives across departments—account planning, account management, and creative—the work we present here highlights in-depth interviews conducted with advertising creatives. Our questions addressed the process of advertising production with a focus on the role of the West, whiteness, and relations of domination, beginning with the client's brief through to the creation and production of advertisements for specific brands. We combine these interviews with observations of internal meetings within agencies, which we recorded in field notes.

*Reception.* We complement our analysis of advertising representation and production with an analysis of consumer reception of print and television ads. The third author conducted in-depth interviews in Kolkata, Belgaum, and Tiruchirappalli (Trichy). The third author lived in these cities and had access to consumers there. The three cities represent centers in the East (Kolkata), West (Belgaum), and South (Trichy) of India. According to [worldpopulationreview.com](http://worldpopulationreview.com) (2023), these are also cities of different population sizes: Kolkata at 4.6 million, Trichy at 1.1 million, and Belgaum at 0.42 million. We used television and print advertisements to elicit narratives from consumers. We collected ads from advertising agencies, English print media, and from a website that contained a repository of Indian ads ([www.afaqs.com](http://www.afaqs.com)). We eventually narrowed our sample to nine print ads and eight television ads. The ads we selected represent a wide range of product categories relevant to urban middle-class consumers, such as housing, tableware, automobiles, clothing, and business magazines. We selected ads with an explicit use of Western settings or brand names. In our selection of print ads and films, we focused on verbal cues (words, metaphors), visual cues (clothing, setting, use of colors, and composition), and sounds (notably the use of music) to examine how contemporary advertising narratives that harnessed and

manipulated Western references were perceived by middle-class Indian consumers. For example, following this reasoning, we selected a DLF ad that explicitly made use of a European brand name and symbolism. We also chose DLF because our production fieldwork was conducted in the agency that had developed advertising for this real-estate firm. Given our insights into why the agency chose to give them a particular creative treatment, we sought to examine consumer interpretations of the ad.

We presented the ads to 31 middle class Indian consumers whose responses to the ads and semi-structured questions serve as a basis for this discussion. We provide the details of these consumers in table 2 in the web appendix. They were 13 women and 18 men ranging in age from 18 to 45 years; their educational levels ranged from no university education to PhDs. Most were university graduates over the age of 30. We sought a variety of middle-class professions. They are from India's "new middle class" (Brosius 2010). We focused on the Indian middle class because of its recent transformation into a consuming class with high levels of exposure to the West through popular media and travel experiences (Derné 2008). Interviews were conducted in English, Hindi, and Tamil and later transcribed and translated into English.

In our analysis, we wished to understand "socio-culturally normalized and institutionalized ways of thinking" (Moisander, Peñaloza, and Valtonen 2009, 20). Our understanding of post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, and the framing of neocolonial consumption within it, evolved during the course of data collection and analysis as we went back and forth between our findings and theory. While in our initial interviews with creatives and consumers we did not explicitly ask questions about the role of whiteness in Indian advertising, we gradually noted the unmistakable occurrence of colorism and racial politics in Indian advertising. After going back and forth between our data and scholarship in the theorizations of colonialism and consumer culture theory, we developed new interview questions relating to colorism, which we used in the later rounds of interviews with consumers and advertising professionals.

We analyzed the data through a constant comparative method that involved continuous movement between ads, transcripts, field notes and our emergent understanding of the entire data set (Strauss and Corbin 1990) in combination with existing theoretical understanding. Our analysis process started with open coding. We identified codes in the form of simple descriptive concepts or phrases appearing directly in ads or the interview data with respect to politics of consumer respectability and neocolonial consumption. Our open coding was followed by axial coding that grouped codes into different themes. Finally, through selective coding, we iterated our themes with theorizations of colonialism and consumer culture theory, and the emerging conceptualization of the framing of neocolonial



consumption within post-colonial politics of consumer respectability.

## FINDINGS

In this section, we unpack the framing of neocolonial consumption within the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability in production, representation, and reception of Indian advertising. The post-colonial politics of consumer respectability is closely intertwined with colonial relations because advertisers depend upon the symbolic codes of the West: whiteness and Eurocentric modernity. At the same time, to create successful ads, agencies need to speak the language of the “locally oriented” middle-class Indians (Derné 2008, 156) and valorize Indianness. Their success depends largely on their ability to communicate consumer respectability by (1) avenging colonial degradation, (2) attaching emblems of Eurocentric modernity, and (3) furthering Whiteness in the frames of post-colonial advertising (we provide further evidence of the three themes in table 3 in the web appendix).

### Avenging Degradation

In contemporary India, the middle-class desire for respectability to overcome colonial humiliations modulates the old binary of the colonizer and the colonized as advertisers try to position the country as an “emerging market” (Kaur 2020). The spatio-temporal idea of an “emerging market” that rests on India as a new economic power combines with the notion of a timeless nation as a morally and spiritually superior entity. Idealistic as this may be, it serves to degrade the West, seek respect for middle classes, and to gloss over its own exploitative and oppressive neocolonial impulses.

In a reversal of the earlier post-independence rejection of foreign financial capital, there has been a concerted attempt by the post-colonial state and advertising agencies to sell a brand-new India as an emerging market that is confident, growing, modern, and ready to compete with the West (Kaur 2020). The shift is particularly captured in the positions of advertising professionals and middle-class consumers. The socio-cultural position of advertising executives and our consumer participants are what Derné (2008, 233) calls the “transnationally oriented middle class,” the minority of Indians belonging to the English-speaking elite with well-paid jobs and cosmopolitan lifestyles who position themselves transnationally, in relation to the Western white middle class. These consumers and advertising executives are in-between: between the West and the specificities of their locations in India (Cayla and Elson 2012). This in-betweenness is laced with a desire for recognition and respect by degrading the colonizer. Consider the following ad content in which Britain is

presented as a treacherous and perfidious nation in an ad for an Indian business magazine,

The copy of the advertisement claims (web appendix figure 1):

They came in with the excuse of trading and stayed on to rule. For over a century we struggled to get rid of them. And now to decide India's No. 1 magazine we look towards the British once again. Déjà vu?

Our obsession to curry favour with our colonial masters has been carried to a ridiculous extreme by a competing business magazine. It approached the British Audit Bureau of Circulations to certify its circulation. This certificate they have been triumphantly circulating as a substantiation of their (dubious) claim to being India's largest selling business magazine.

On the one hand, the ad is an attempt to discredit a competitor who has “slavishly” used data from the British Audit Bureau of Circulations. On the other hand, it builds on the history of British treachery (e.g., “They came in with the excuse of trading and stayed on to rule”) to ascriptively degrade Britishers (Lukes 1997). It frames the colonizer as deceitful and lacking moral rectitude. The ad attempts to demonstrate that colonialism in the past was not a result of India's internal weaknesses or conflicts but directly caused by British perfidy. Moreover, the ad's visual uses a colonial image of white Britishers sitting on chairs surrounded by Indian servants. It is another reminder of the exploitative and oppressive master–slave relationship that characterized India's past. In making fun of a competitor that is still stuck in a subservient past, the business magazine aims to occupy the prerogative position of belonging to the present and future that is emerging as Indian.

Such a spatio-temporal framing that shapes the post-colonial politics of respectability is echoed by consumers. They denigrate and essentialize the West in a way that resonates with Indian advertisers. This narrative draws on India's colonial experience with a specific discourse casting Britishers as treacherous and perfidious invaders, who looted the country (Dalrymple 2019). For instance, in response to the business magazine advertisement, Mumtaz, a middle-aged consumer concurred with the ad's theme that the British were indeed looters and reported the following experience about her visit to a museum in London,

We had gone to see the Kohinoor (diamond) at a museum there (in London). We had to pay 10 pounds to see it. So, I was like, first they take it away from us, and then they make us pay to see it! So that is like twice looting us!

Mumtaz refers more specifically to the Kohinoor, an extraordinary 105-carat diamond found in India that eventually became a part of the British crown jewels (Dalrymple and Anand 2016). The story of the theft of Kohinoor is commonly recounted by Indians and is a challenge to the triumphalist colonial narrative that serves as a “stock story”

of the British “civilizational” mission in its colonies (Bell 2020, 27). “Stock stories are a set of standard typical or familiar stories held in reserve to explain racial dynamics in ways that support the status quo” (Bell 2020, 27). Such stories reproduce white supremacy and strengthen colonial narratives. In invoking the Kohinoor story, Mumtaz ruptures the narrative, poses a challenge to white supremacy, and attempts to degrade the colonizers as looters. This episode from Indian history feeds into the “drain thesis” associated with British colonialism (Mukherjee 2022). According to this thesis, as a British colony, India was forced to transfer the equivalent of trillions of USD to England, which is deemed to be the cause of its recent history of poverty and under-development.

In the spatio-temporal framing of emerging India, there is also an attempt to alter the center–periphery relationship (Wallerstein 2011) in which the West is deemed as developed and India lags behind as a peripheral nation. For example, India is shown to be marching ahead in the advertising frames of Hero Honda. The voiceover in a television advertisement for Hero Honda (the ad link is available in table 4 of the web appendix) motorcycle says:

Mr. Richard has liked my design. I just have to accept the offer letter and I leave for America [followed by visuals of the young protagonist riding a bike and going past tall buildings under construction and the Indian national flag]. I had left home happily and thinking of going to America, but now I’m thinking, what is there which is not available here? I am leaving my home and helping others. *No, I’m sorry America* [tears the offer letter and throws it away]. *I’m coming back India* [emphases added].

Instead of Britain, the old colonial master, this ad targets the United States, seen as an imperialist nation. The story of a young engineer rejecting a job offer from the United States inverts the prevalent narrative in Indian and Western media of young Indians migrating to Western countries for better lifestyles and career opportunities. Countering this discourse, the ad offers a futuristic narrative of Indian economic superiority, development, respect, and return to the homeland. The national flag is an important marker that reminds the young engineer of his commitments to his country’s future. As Sandeep, the marketing manager in charge of this communication campaign, explained:

We are trying to show that whatever development is happening in the United States is also happening in India. We are trying to show opportunities in India today are similar to those in America. What could have been done there can also be done in India . . . It also has to be noted that he (protagonist) does not say sorry to Mr. Richard, he says sorry to America. Here is a young Indian who is challenging everything that America symbolizes. It reflects an attitude. It’s like saying *America ko thenga dikhla diya* [thumbs down as a sign of derision or contempt]. It’s saying, *America go fly a kite, I know what I can do!*

The references to the United States, and the “opportunities” available there, are especially surprising in this ad because the product advertised was developed by Hero Honda, an Indo-Japanese joint venture. Despite Japan’s economic development, the creative team chose the United States to represent an imperialist country that is a worthy target to be challenged. Indeed, Sandeep did not miss an opportunity to lampoon and denigrate the US when he had the ad character assert “America go fly a kite.” We are reminded of Fanon’s (1963) observation that slaves crave for a good fight with their masters to displace them. In this narrative of respect, to occupy an exalted position it seems necessary to reverse the degradation of colonialism and to humiliate the old master as a means of retribution for old wounds. As Dong and Tian (2009) point out in a Chinese context, desires to reorder hierarchies such that the oppressed become the oppressor, are common to post-colonial nationalism.

In post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, a more explicit attempt at reversing colonial humiliation and center–periphery relations can be seen in the advertisement for Rajnigandha (the ad link is available in table 4 of the web appendix) a brand of *paan masala* (betel mix), where the protagonist is a light-skinned Indian executive who decides to buy the “East India Company” on a business trip to London. This advertisement celebrates the Indian desire to outshine the colonizer. The ad centers on the East India Company (EIC), a British joint stock company formed to trade with India, which eventually ruled large parts of the country with its private army from 1757 to 1858 (Dalrymple 2019). After the rebellion of 1857, the control of the colony was taken over by the British Crown through an act of parliament (Sarkar 1983). The EIC was dissolved by another act of the British parliament in 1874. In the Rajnigandha ad, India becomes a symbol of potentiality and futurity, a locus of “dreams for the future” (Mankekar 2015, 25). This ad resonates with Orlove and Bauer’s (1997) observation that Western products can be used to fashion emergent national identities. The protagonist in the Rajnigandha ad is dressed in conspicuously Western attire but is nevertheless adamantly Indian, even belligerently so. The most decisive moment in this ad occurs when he asserts, “now it is our turn.” It goes beyond the idea of Indians living in the same time period frame as Westerners (Cayla and Eckhardt 2008) and it helps mount an imaginary challenge to the ex-master in a moment of post-colonial revenge (Fanon 1963). In the final scene of the ad, with a complete reversal of colonial relations and signifying newfound post-colonial respect, the Indian protagonist is seated and white Britishers are standing behind him in a position of subordination. The Rajnigandha ad makes it clear that *while Britain ruled in the past, now is the turn of the colonized* to surpass their masters and turn the tables. Consumers echo the trope of the colonized overcoming

their inferiority by becoming new masters. Consider a young consumer, Dipsubhra's reception of this ad,

From advertisement point of view, it is good as it shows the confidence that Indians have today....[Indians have a] growing economic clout. It is backed by some cases like Tata and Mittal taking over the British and European firms.... If I remember correctly, Arcelor chief used to say to Mittal, Indians created cologne and Europeans created perfume so we are considered to be inferior is no longer true. Indians are not inferior....The way Indians were viewed or perceived has changed a lot.

Dipsubhra refers to the takeover of Arcelor S.A., a large European steel corporation, by Mittal Steel in 2006, whose founder Lakshmi Mittal is of Indian origin. He also alludes to several European acquisitions made by the India-based Tata Group that include Jaguar, Land Rover, Tetley, and Corus (Hindustan Times 2008). Such assertions of India's dominance over the West and a reversal of the colonial relations of power are not meant to highlight individual uniqueness of middle-class consumption as a signifier of status but, as Kravets and Sandikci (2014) have noted, invoke shared and organized ways of imagining the hierarchy. Indeed, middle-class Indians are proud to point out current and former Indian or Indian-origin CEOs of prominent global corporations including Alphabet/Google, Amazon, IBM, Adobe, Twitter, Chanel, Deloitte, Deutsche Bank, Nokia, Motorola, PepsiCo, Starbucks, YouTube, and Mastercard.

We found that advertisers and consumers add an important nuance to avenging degradation in post-colonial politics of respectability by presenting a stylized spatio-temporal narrative of a timeless India. Kaur (2020, 114) describes this feature of being a timeless nation as, "the capacity to absorb and yet retain its core, far from being a sign of India's inability to join the march of progress with the rest of the world, becomes a powerful and even durable sign of vitality." In this discourse of a timeless India, economic progress is combined with an unchanging superior morality to imagine a new alternative modernity. It is a form of strategic essentialism that Spivak (1996) describes as rejecting the idea that identities are stable and homogeneous, but for political purposes acting as though they are unchanging essences. For example, an ad for a prominent men's underwear brand shows Bollywood star Salman Khan successfully arm wrestling with different white men (the ad link is available in table 4 of the web appendix). While Khan wins each time he wrestles, he intentionally loses to a white man who needs the prize money for his disabled son. He goes on to magnanimously throw the match. The ad caption proclaims in Hindi, "It's more important to win hearts." Here, a popular Indian movie star, who usually portrays a hyper-masculine image, is shown as exerting physical power over whites, but using it compassionately. Moreover, the Indian here has morality

and kindness. In a similar vein, middle-class consumers try to project Indians as compassionate and morally superior—in other words, as modern and yet wedded to traditions. Indeed, the consumers we interviewed valorized timeless India as a superior moral entity for its spirituality and humaneness. Mangesh told us,

People here, they have love and affection. They have strong bonding within the family. I don't think they are so abroad. For them (those in the West), well, I have to be happy. If you want to be happy, be happy. I won't disturb you. Here, family bonding is strong. The bonds between wife and husband, parents and children, all are strong. In the West, I don't think they are so loving. Even kids, they want to be by themselves. There is no affection there.

Such spatio-temporal narratives of respect and their corresponding marketing stories draw upon and reinforce essentialism contrasting India, as a loving and caring society, with Western societies as individualistic and materialistic. As Panikkar (2007, 14) describes, it is a narrative of an "alternative modernity" that combines tradition with modernity. In this advertising narrative that is informed by neoliberalism and capitalist development, the West is not shunned but absorbed in the folds of timelessness that essentialized unchanging India represents. As Ger and Belk (1996) suggest, the flow of goods and experiences due to globalization can result in consumer reactions, specifically including a return to roots, resistance, local appropriation of goods, and creolization. Our consumer participants also wish to retain their perceived cultural roots; they express a desire to retain the supposedly communitarian and caring ethic of a timeless Indian society, while also wishing to move forward to a future India that is ostensibly modern and prosperous, but which remains resolutely "Indian."

Consumers articulate unchanging Indian identity by using the West as a contrapuntal trope for what India is not. Consider Gandhimathy, a middle-class female consumer who further told us,

In our culture, there is a lot of affection, caring for others... grandparents, (on the) father's side, mother's side, relationships with brothers, sisters...but there (in the West), that is missing.

In this form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1996) that shapes politics of consumer respect, India is recognized as a moral utopia that is different from its colonizers. It highlights India's capacity to "endure" without losing its "inner core" (Kaur 2020, 114). It is similar to Du Bois' (1903) reading of African spirituality as opposed to European materialism.

However, such middle-class notions of love and care are rarely extended to India's vast under-classes who are violently exploited by the elite (Varman et al. 2021). In a highly unequal India, while a tiny fraction of 1% owns

50% of the wealth, the bottom 60% owns only 4.8% of the wealth (Business Standard 2019). In such an unequal and exploitative order embedded in additional layers of caste-based and gender-based social oppression, the narrative of India as an unchanging and caring society reinforces the status quo and power of the elite. Such a status quo further perpetuates neocolonial oppression and exploitation of the internal Other by middle and upper classes. This is somewhat akin to Cayla and Eckhardt's (2008) transnational Asian community, forged through the imaginative use of places and symbols. We see Indian advertisers and consumers strategically employing rhetoric to glide over neocolonial everyday exploitation and oppression of vast swathes of the poor, low castes, religious minorities, and women. But the ads they produce and consume instead portray a respectable "Indian" consumer, animated by a pan-Indian nationalism and desire to degrade the former master.

### Desiring Modernity

In a reversal of the spatio-temporal trope of an emerging and timeless India that is superior to the West, the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability is also premised on a desire for Eurocentric modernity that highlights a sense of inadequacy. In doing so, post-colonial advertising reinforces the center-periphery relations in which the West is dominant. It is advertising that resonates with Du Bois' (1903, 2) double consciousness or "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings." The advertising creatives we studied continue to employ Eurocentric modernity to partly denigrate India's present as lagging behind the West. In a neocolonial turn, this leads to the formerly colonized endorsing ideologies that are repressive to their own society (Nkrumah 1966).

Indian advertisers use Eurocentric modernity as a powerful semiotic trope to arouse desire, signify respect, and generate demand for products and services. Modernity is particularly needed because advertisers believe that Indian consumers are lagging behind their Western counterparts. For instance, Anant, an advertiser noted,

West is more mature not in terms of communication we develop but the recipient. The consumer of that advertising is somewhat more evolved.

I- As in?

Anant- Evolved as in understanding of communication. They are far more evolved. We (in India) have not reached a certain level. We are there but I would say only 60%.

In such a framing, post-colonial advertising uses modernity to self-denigrate and to present products or services that help consumers to overcome this inadequacy and earn respect. Thus, spatio-temporality in advertising is partly premised on furthering the ideal of Eurocentric modernity, an ideal that reinforces Western superiority. It resonates

with Joshi's (2016, 106–7) observation that colonialism made Indian middle-classes perceive their European counterparts as more authentic, and they continue to live with "the residual anxieties that they don't quite measure up to certain Western standards." While much of advertising thrives on engendering a fear of inadequacy, the important point here is that advertising in the West, unlike in India, is not premised on perpetual colonialism, and striving to catch up with a superior European "Other."

We find this inadequacy echoed in the narratives of advertisers who frame Indians as laggards. In one ad agency where we conducted fieldwork, we observed how a creative team was working on a new campaign for the Indian firm Birla Tyres. In an effort to increase desire for its products, the creative team discussed how they could frame Indian products as belonging to the future and not the past. In the brief given by the client, the creative team was assigned the task of coming up with a brand name that had to be "Western, modern and young."

In responding to this brief, Somu, the team leader, began by making a presentation about the competitive landscape. Team members then animatedly discussed the differences between "sports" tires and "normal" tires. Sports tires are curved and help in maneuvering the vehicle but Avinash, a team member, made the point that most people riding motorbikes in India think they are riding a sports bike. Sajeev, another team member, further elaborated on Indian motorbikes as "technologically behind when compared to American motorbikes" and commented that "Europe was in the 21<sup>st</sup> century while India was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century." The creatives working on the campaign consulted several English-language websites looking for synonyms for the word "vital," and came up with a long list of names—Valero, Izon, Cavallo etc. After considerable discussion, Sajeev decided that "the horse" would be an ideal representation to use for the tire as a symbol of dependability and vitality. They came up with "Bronc" and "Poizan" as possible brand names. Bronc is a word for horse in English and Poizan is the name of an extinct Polish horse. Importantly, the choice of a European name was never questioned within the creative team. In a context where leading tire brands are named Goodyear, Michelin, Ceat, and Continental, using a Western name allows users to attach the brand to a desirable future time and the modernity it signifies. This is similar to Lamont and Molnár's (2001) observation of black conspicuous consumption and marketing in the US, and Liu and Kozinets' (2022) theorization on countering stigma through consumption, which are marked by the need to signal worthiness to compensate for stigmatized social identities.

In the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, such a neocolonial framing of consumption is further evident in the production of advertising for Hero Honda. One of the ads for the motorcycle shows a light-skinned young man in jeans and sleeveless shirt, playing a guitar, and



standing next to a Hero Honda motorcycle (web appendix figure 2). The wall in the background has graffiti on it. The ad caption reads “the style that inspires.” Sukanto, the creative who worked on the ad, explained that the man portrayed was meant to be a painter, and that the whole ad was designed to construct a specific “style”:

We wanted to highlight style. We decided to show a smart guy who is playing a guitar. The use of graffiti on the walls shows a youth street [sic]. Our protagonist is a painter. Not the traditional painter in *kurta pajama*, but a smart one in jeans and with a guitar. It's all about style.

In order to connote “style,” Sukanto chose jeans and a guitar rather than Indian symbols such as a “traditional painter in *kurta pajama*” (traditional North Indian male attire). In this context, Western clothing symbolizes futurity. The man wears jeans and shirt rather than *kurta* and *pajama* that would signify the past. The ad transforms the stereotypical imagination of an Indian painter as carrying a *jhola* (traditional Indian tote bag) and wearing a *kurta* to a modern consumer wearing jeans and a sleeveless shirt. Thus, we witness consumer respect being premised on a transformation to Eurocentric modernity.

Such a neocolonial desire for Eurocentric modernity is strongly evident in the frames of a DLF advertisement (web appendix figure 3) that promotes a new housing complex in Gurgaon, a posh suburb on the outskirts of New Delhi. The suburb hosts golf courses, shopping malls, and apartment towers. The ad's copy assures buyers that they will secure entry into an elite housing complex. The ad depicts four angels blowing trumpets atop a classic Greek columned archway that is framed to emphasize the sky, as if the angels were not only announcing a new building, but also a new era of heavenly development. Using the name *Belaire* for the community has a distant and vague French resonance, while also citing a Los Angeles neighborhood to connote luxury and exclusivity. This kind of naming strategy to evoke a “world Indianness” (Mazzarella 2003; Searle 2010) is frequent in Indian real estate. Other buildings with English or American names in New Delhi include: Marble Arch, Wembly Estate, Trinity Towers, Hamilton Court, Victoria Gardens, Westend Heights, Malibu Town, Beverley Park, Central Park, Orange County, Park Place, Palm Springs, and Aspen Greens (Searle 2010, 217). Such advertising practices draw upon Western modernity that is, as Joshi (2016) points out, a colonial fiction.

These naming practices evoke a phantasmic West that is an epistemological object “whose presence or absence cannot be definitely located” (Ivy 1995, 22), a place with no objective referent, a kind of spectral presence with ambiguous contours that haunts the marketing of real estate in post-colonial India. In such a context, inflecting the ad with the appeal of Western modernity was particularly

important to connote respectability, as Nimi, the creative executive who designed the ad emphasized:

This is an ugly ad. I created it for my client. They wanted to project classy, upscale, and aspirational imagery. So they wanted to use a French brand name. We like the sound of *gora* (White European) sounding names. I was asked to depict *gora* homes. We in India are enamored by how *goras* live.

Nimi acknowledged the neocolonial framing of consumption in the DLF ad. Ironically, even as she lamented the deployment of Europe to connote respectability, Nimi insisted that the Indian middle-classes desire Western modernity to overcome their sense of inferiority. Such a desire for Western modernity can also be found in Ghanaian consumers' desire for foreign-origin objects, serving to reinforce transnational center-periphery hierarchies (Appau and Crockett 2023). With these ads and others, advertisers construct respectability by portraying spaces where middle-class Indians can limit their exposure to the other India of dark-skinned and underclasses. This is similar to what Crockett (2017) describes as normative respectability in which attempts are made to create distance from underclass Indians.

When we shared the DLF ad with consumers to ask them about their interpretation, Puja told us,

A very high-*funda* (high sounding) name. Not a typical Indian name. Mahindra Club etc. are Indian names. *Belaire* is something lavish, or something luxurious. I think the name also makes a difference. Which is this school here [thinking], Lovedale International? There is nothing international in it. It's like a regular school. But people put their kids in that school, just going by the name – Lovedale International. There is also Mahila Vidyalaya (another school). I did a survey when I was in 12<sup>th</sup> standard. Students from Marathi (a major Indian language) medium (at Mahila Vidyalaya), they have topped in SSLC as well as in PU II (important school leaving exams in India), [but] *nahi yaar, woh to aise hi school hain* (people still consider it a bad school). Lovedale International is considered to be good.

Echoing research on the power of Western brand names to evoke respectability and prestige (Melnyk, Klein, and Völckner 2012), Puja believes that a French name makes consumers believe in the superiority of the product. Puja suggests that “*Belaire*” sounds more luxurious than “Mahindra Club,” which was another gated development also constructed by a large Indian corporation (Brosius 2010). The gated community itself is a Western form with status connotations that further physically separates the rising middle class from the majority of Indians (Searle 2010).

Consumers also evoke tropes of spatio-temporal lag while responding to such advertising. Consumers see India and Indians to be behind the West in terms of economic

development, and as a consequence, such narratives consign India to the waiting room of history (Chakrabarty 2000). The act of catching up with the West is carried out through sedulous imitation of Western place-markers such as a graffiti-covered wall or European sounding residential complexes. Making the temporal lag in these narratives transparent, Mahesh, a consumer, told us,

Our people here don't think of the future. They are taking up some work, something can happen in the future, some continuity can be there, they don't think of that. . . Whatever you are doing now, research, in America it would have been done a hundred years before. These people, they don't have any such results. And in whichever sector they have used their brains and done something, it will not work for even one year. Take Tata vehicles. Tata is made by Indians, the only thing that became successful is the truck. In small cars, there was no success. All the cars failed. . . Western products, whether they are small or big, they are made after study.

Mahesh's criticism of Tata Motors, which is the largest Indian automobile firm, is based on its perceived inability to support the production of its vehicles with research, and also on being behind in the march of progress. Mahesh sees Tata Motors as following technology developed in the West several decades back. Tata Group has developed several cars and, as mentioned earlier, has acquired Jaguar and Land Rover in the UK. Mahesh, however, rejects Tata's offerings as based on outdated technology, and added,

In India, almost all the people, they have half-knowledge (sic). . . Indian people, they are like servants. Supposing they [the West] manufacture a Xerox (photocopier) machine, to use that, we Indians will be available. But we won't have the brains to make it. We are like operators. Indian products don't become successful, whether you talk about Indian designs, Indian concepts.

Importantly, Mahesh builds on a neocolonial spatio-temporal frame to think about these various market relationships. In this narrative of "lack," and echoing the findings of Kjeldgaard and Askegaard (2006), Indians do not have the scientific temperament that the West possesses. As Chatterjee (2011, 51) notes, "the postcolonial love for the West flows out of a concept of the West. This concept has congealed in postcolonial minds over the last five hundred years." In these narratives, the colonized further self-deprecate. Ashwin, another male consumer told us,

The West is more advanced, technology, open relationships. They are more advanced in their ways of living, their habits. They are more conscious about their health; they make their lives easier by following good habits.

In this neocolonial conceptualization that shapes post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, Indians are subjects who lag behind Westerners and are trying to catch up with the West, evoking a stark temporal distance from

India. Like the Chinese consumers studied by Dong and Tian (2009), Indian consumers associate Western brands with high quality, economic progress, and modernity.

### Whitening Self

In post-colonial Indian advertising, whiteness is commonly deployed to signify respect. Indeed, whiteness is a central feature in the framing of neocolonial consumption. Whiteness creates a hierarchy of color in which the dark-skinned are considered inferior and fit for subordination and exploitation (Grier et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019). We found that ad executives create a light-skinned India, a whitened nation, as a reaffirmation of the color hierarchy. By affixing fair-skinned models to products and lifestyles in post-colonial India, Indian advertising creates discursive equivalence between whiteness, respectability, and class distinction, all of which become indexically related signs.

In ads, the positions of dark-skinned models are fixed in two ways—they are either absent or their deployment is confined to under-class positions. There is colorism in which dark-skinned Indians are framed as inferior (Costa 1998; Grier et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019; Varman and Costa 2013). Confirming the degrading fixation of dark skin, Dipannita Sharma, a model, lamented, "it (the advertising industry) has some kind of fairness obsession" and Pranab Awasti, of Delhi's Glitz Modelling agency, added, "Indians in general have that inferiority complex, we have had a hangover about fair skin, since the British left India" (Madison 2011). As Sims and Hirudayaraj (2016) have noted, dark-skinned models have fewer opportunities to appear in commercials because white skin is considered more appealing. In fact, Mishra (2015, 734) suggests that, "almost 90% of all advertisements show lighter skinned models." What is going on here may be similar to what Lamont and Molnár (2001) found with African American marketing executives creating lightening appeals to other African American consumers. These executives uniformly envisioned consumers as middle class: that is as being like them or else aspiring to be middle class. In so doing, they were dismissing the vast majority of African American consumers as beneath consideration.

The use of fair-skinned models to imagine freedom, progress, and modernity in post-colonial India frames a stratification in which dark-skinned and under-class Indians are robbed of their corporeality and agency, and made into, to borrow from Fanon (1952), degraded appendages of whitened consumers. It creates what Burke (1996, 188) describes as "intersections between commodification and racialized consciousness of class, status, and power." An illustration of such inter-corporeality is provided in an ad created in 2006 for Happydent, an Italian-Dutch brand of chewing gum, that shows dark-skinned young men working for a royal family (the ad link is available in table 4 of the web appendix). These young men are tied to cars and

suspended from poles and ceilings as lamps. As the sun sets, these workers put Happydent chewing gum in their mouths and smile. Their smiles light up the arena to show the role of Happydent in creating illumination through whiter teeth, contrasting with dark bodies.

Moreover, in a series of ads by Center Fresh and Center Fruit, again chewing gum brands, under-classes are depicted as dark-skinned. In a particularly illustrative television ad, a tourist stops at a make-shift automated teller machine (ATM) to withdraw money in the middle of a jungle (the ad link is available in [table 4](#) of the [web appendix](#)). The makeshift machine has a dark-skinned poor man tied in ropes and his job is to push out the desired amount of cash kept inside the ATM. Tellingly, the “owner” of the ATM is a lighter skinned man, with the Carnatic (south Indian) music playing in the background strongly hinting that he is a high caste south Indian. The ATM operates by dangling a Center Fruit in front of the tied-up man, who starts drooling at the sight of the chewing gum and pushes the currency notes out of the window with his wagging tongue. Similarly, an ad for Fevicol adhesive depicts under-class dark-skinned carpenters who work at making furniture (the ad link is available in [table 4](#) of the [web appendix](#)). In such ads, signifying respectability, depictions of middle-class or more elite groups are clearly through whiter models. Although there is no evidence to suggest that middle classes in India have lighter skin colors, such advertising depictions in which workers and poorer sections are shown as dark-skinned are common in Indian advertising and media to frame the equivalence between under-classes and dark skin color ([Dhillon-Jamerson 2019](#)).

In a series of ads for Unilever’s whitening cream Fair & Lovely, there are similar degrading depictions of dark-skinned Indians who are shown to be unappealing, unsuccessful, and epidermally fixed in their under-class positions. For instance, a Fair & Lovely ad shows an unsuccessful under-class dark-skinned woman (the ad link is available in [table 4](#) of the [web appendix](#)). She attributes her failure to her dark skin and decides to use Fair & Lovely to change her fortune. The ad shows her skin becoming lighter with the use of Fair & Lovely and the change making her into an attractive woman who gets hired as a flight attendant. Such advertising depictions further the valorization of whiteness in contemporary India. They draw upon and further colorism, as [Adbi et al. \(2021\)](#) have demonstrated, that adversely affects the disempowered. Unlike the colonial epidermal schema that legitimized exploitation and oppression by European colonizers, the contemporary epidermal schema frames neocolonial consumption and naturalizes exploitation and oppression of the under-classes by India’s new middle-classes. This is something [Dhillon-Jamerson \(2019\)](#) calls pigmentocracy. Betraying a sense of anxiety and fear of dark skin coming into close contact with whitened middle-class Indians, and

as a new avatar of colonial ontological wounding, dark-skinned Indians are rarely allowed to venture into more elite advertising frames as their bodies are perceived to be inferior and unwanted. This view of consumer respectability was re-affirmed by Sandeep, a Marketing Manager of a large Indian automobile firm, who told us, “using white women, Western attire, and a figure like James Bond in Indian ads helps to make our brands more aspirational.”

Advertisers develop associations between whiteness, respect, and agency, as we observe in the campaign for Arrow shirts ([web appendix figure 4](#)). The objective of the campaign was to rejuvenate the Arrow brand in India, as the creative brief below outlined:

Given that the core audience profile has now become younger – 22-28 years (from 30 to 40 years then), the brand does not resonate with the young corporate Indian and his changing mindset.

In addition to various options discussed to revive the Arrow brand, a related brand strategy document from the same company also noted that the new target for Arrow shirts were “21<sup>st</sup> century Boston Brahmins.” An important point to be noted is that advertisers use Boston, an American city to construct the future (21<sup>st</sup> century). In America Boston Brahmins are an elite group of Harvard-educated professionals, while in India the term mixes caste and cosmopolitan Westernness. Thus, the juxtaposition of the American metropolis of Boston, high caste, and the future plays a critical role in the development of the campaign. Here, as [Miller \(1995\)](#) shows, Western names get appropriated, and placed in a non-Western matrix of goods. We see Boston being appropriated by Indian advertisers to represent Indian products in particular ways, enmeshing them in categorizations involving respect and class.

With the aim of attracting the target demographic of the “21<sup>st</sup> century Boston Brahmin,” Komal, the senior creative working on the account, directed the creative team to use American or European fashion photographers:

Ashok, I did read your comments, but I feel that a couple of routes here do answer the brief. My only worry is that if we start to spell out mental sharpness it might come across as heavy. The ads should point to the mental sharpness of the Arrow guy without overtly spelling it out. I feel that “Find your way” route is very much in line with what you say in your mail. The “Get what you want” also talks of our man’s mental sharpness albeit in a slightly roundabout way and that’s what I like about it. More than that to me it seems “Young” and edgy in tonality which is also a good thing. Correctly executed with one of the top fashion photographers from the US or Europe shooting it, this campaign will automatically take on the cerebral twist we want to give. (email communication)

In Komal’s email, there is a clear emphasis on using Western talent, in this case, fashion photographers, to



shape Arrow’s communication. The idea is to select not just a good photographer but also someone capable of lending *the right style* to the ad. Such an approach strongly echoes Davis’ (2018, 143) observation that, “Social beliefs about race and racial hierarchies contribute to marketing thought which in turn influence marketing decisions and practices at the institutional level.”

In this ad, like others, the construction of corporeal “style” was not like Merleau-Ponty’s (1968) imagination of bodily schema. Instead, it was predicated upon the blending of several signs that evoke the time and space of a more elite India that is also a whitened India with what Fanon (1952) describes as a racial epidermal schema. The client and the agency agreed that the best way to appeal to the ambitious and upwardly mobile Indian executive targeted by Arrow was to use white models for the shoot—that whiteness and Western production values were necessary to develop a “modern style.” In other words, if the product is to be imbued with respectability and appeal for middle classes, a central part of this discourse is the whiteness of models that evokes the agency of upward mobility.

We find similar epidermalized narratives of respectability among consumers. Consider Siddharth’s observations about colorism,

We are obsessed with fair color. We like to see all ads with white models. Appeal of the Arrow ad would be far less if there was a non-white person. . . . A reason is that we have been ruled by whites for a long time.

Several scholars have pointed to how colorism is widespread in India and there are no guidelines governing how advertisers, popular media, and workplaces should handle the issue (Adbi et al. 2021; Mishra 2015; Sims and Hirudayaraj 2016). As Siddharth shows, there is normalization of colorism and it leads to valorization of whiteness. Another consumer, Shilpa agreed with Siddharth and added, “Everyone wants to see a petite model or fair and good hair and all. Indians are not used to seeing [dark skinned person in ads]. Still, color matters.” Thus, as Burke (1996) also observes, advertising creates an inextricable intertwining of post-colonial consciousness about color and privileges. Another middle-class consumer, Puja, in her reception of such ads agrees that colorism and privileges are linked to each other, and points to a television series that reinforces the relationship,

In India. . . most of us feel that only the fair ones are smart. Tall dark and handsome but people have removed the dark and want only tall and handsome. That’s everyone’s view. . . . That serial on Colors (a television channel) is there, the girl puts paint on her face, Nakusha. . . she is a very fair girl and her mother wants to save her from men and one or two times, she was kidnapped due to her beauty so, her mother puts black paint on her. That girl is so beautiful but because of the men around her, she has to become dark and

when she is dark, no one is looking at her and bothered also that she is there. Even the kidnapper is calling her stupid.

Puja refers to *Laagi Tujhse Lagan*, a popular Hindi television series that equates fair skin with attractiveness and intelligence. Such colorism is common in advertising and media representations, and reinforces the cultural script of whiteness that consumers draw upon to fix the subordinate position of those with darker skin (Nagar 2018).

We see a particularly telling deployment of colorism in an ad for La Opala (web appendix figure 5), an Indian manufacturer of tableware, which shows a White female model looking up, hands pointing up, striking a pose that evokes the posture of prayer in Christian religious iconography with the headline “the diva of tableware is here.” Despite the product being relatively low-tech, the ad also claims that the tableware is manufactured using the “latest European technology.” The creative director in charge of the campaign, Parag, talked about whiteness as symbolizing “latest” and not a past that is connoted by dark skin:

See, till now, we look up to them as if they (whites) are gods or something, as if they are a different breed altogether. Their skins are so white, they are so affluent, and they have got so many things around them. Still, we think, isn’t it? Especially the middle class. When it comes to ‘mastery,’ I need not say anything because they (whites) are masters.

In his interview, Parag insisted that in order to associate La Opala tableware with respect, he had to cast a White model. To Parag, Whites represent the kind of affluence that Indian consumers aspire to, and whiteness is therefore deployed to imagine upper-class breeding, mobility, and modernity. The continued presence of the old ontological wounds from the past colonial encounters is particularly evident in this narrative of whiteness, when Parag emphatically says, “till now.” As Mishra (2015) notes, colonialism contributed to colorism in India by valorizing whiteness. Parag’s timeline of whiteness begins with India’s colonial experience and continues in the post-colonial middle-class imagination. There is a covert negative stereotyping of dark skin by valorizing whiteness. Through the frames of whiteness, advertisers degrade and fix darker bodies outside the realm of respectability. Such a reproduction ossifies existing inequalities predicated on skin color, and further frames neocolonial consumption.

In summary, the production, representation, and reception of Indian advertising reveal how the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability furthers the frames of neocolonial consumption. The framing is shaped by a double consciousness in the form of self-denigration as temporal laggards and epidermal inferiority along with self-valorization as an emerging and timeless nation. Moreover, economically ascendant Indian elites indulge in the revenge fantasy of usurping the West, annexing its



economic riches, and yet remaining communitarian and spiritual in their mythic Indian core. The middle-class consumer's journey to new Indian modernity is shaped by using Western brand and place names, wearing Western attire, adopting whiteness, and often spatially segregating themselves in gated communities, keeping out the India of the under-classes and dark-skinned, and retaining timeless Indian essence.

## DISCUSSION

Colonialism in India was riddled with racialized ascriptive degradation of the local population (Glover 2012; Joshi 2016; Nandy 1983; Panikkar 2007). Such racist degradation was inherent in colonial oppression as it robbed the colonized of respect (Fanon 1952, 1963; Mbembe 2001). Our findings foreground the deployment of avenging degradation, desire for modernity, and whiteness in post-colonial advertising as attempts to restore Indian middle-class consumer respect that was diminished by the colonial encounter. In this study, we build on Crockett's (2017) incisive work on the politics of respect by theorizing the framing of neocolonial consumption within the quest for post-colonial consumer respect.

We make several contributions to consumer culture theory of the Global South. Our emphasis on the politics of consumer respectability deepens the existing understandings of consumer cultures in the Global South that have primarily focused on material deficits. Consider, for instance, Ger and Belk's (1996) reading that the flow of goods and experiences due to Westernization and globalization can result in consumer reactions that include return to roots, resistance, local appropriation of goods, and creolization in the less affluent world. While some of these strategies are available to middle-class consumers in India, the ontological wounds of colonialism elicit a post-colonial politics of consumer respectability that Ger and Belk (1996) under-examine by primarily considering the material facets of poverty and economic exploitation. They were considering consumers of the Global South, but not necessarily colonized ones with a grudge against their former colonial masters. Our post-colonial reading with attention to degradation as *social oppression* helps to arrive at a different conclusion than their suggested emphasis on creolization as a form of accommodation—mixing global and local in the same cultural sphere. Although some accommodation and mixing are present in Indian advertising, there are specific registers of avenging degradation and the resulting tensions that cannot be subsumed under Ger and Belk's (1996) theorization of creolization. The post-colonial politics of consumer respectability with registers of avenging degradation reminds us that instead of mere accommodation or mixing, the colonized craving for a good fight with their ex-masters arises because, as Fanon

(1963, 41) noted, “the native never ceases to dream of putting himself in the place of the settler.” Hence, we add to existing theory by pointing to the limits of the creolization thesis and by drawing attention to a post-colonial desire to achieve consumer respectability by taking revenge on the former colonial master.

Our findings on the desire to displace the colonial master and to take revenge helps to add to the existing work that interprets the West as a signifier of status in the Global South (Burke 1996; Foster 2002). Consider Üstüner and Holt (2010), who, building on the work of Bourdieu (1984), offer a nuanced reading of status, suggesting that the habitus of cultural elites and non-elites is differently aligned toward the role of the West in status games. While high cultural capital consumers are able to draw on the West for status-bolstering consumption, low cultural capital consumers are enmeshed in local fields.

We find that the structurally reproduced dispositions at play in Indian advertising are more complex than those that Üstüner and Holt (2010) describe. We agree with Kravets and Sandikci (2014) that middle-class consumption is a layered process that does not neatly demarcate the West as a status signifier and, instead of a bricolage of uniqueness, follows a cultural script that is ordinary and shared. We further add to extant understanding by showing that middle-class status consumption is marked by what Du Bois (1903) labels as double consciousness in which self-denigration arising from colonial experience is combined with avenging degradations. In addition to using Western symbols, Indian advertisers employ two status signifying practices. First, and as outlined above, loathing for the colonizer transforms the status contest into a desire to degrade and avenge. Advertisers make use of such a desire, and market products by highlighting tropes of avenging by mocking and degrading the West. Second, we witness a “turning away” from the West and a looking inward as a form of what Spivak (1996) describes as strategic essentialism to overcome ontological injury. Colonial modernity was an assault on the spatio-temporal frames of the colonized as they were made out to be primitive savages who could not coeval with the colonizers (Fabian 1983). As a result, status contests in post-colonial advertising center around spatio-temporalities. The claims of superior status for middle-class consumers are not simply located in the time of Western modernity but are inflected with a *more heterogenous time of the past and a supposedly timeless India*. Such “self-recognition” becomes an important way to overcome the inferior status accorded by the colonial encounter (Coulthard 2014). Consequently, the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability cannot be reduced to Indians either seeking a Western stamp of approval or passively emulating the West (Batra et al. 2000). It is also not the same as what Burke (1996, 190) describes as “Fanta faces with Coca Cola legs” in which people who try to become white in their faces never escape

their essential blackness. Post-colonial double consciousness is a double-speak, deflecting the power of the West through a process of strategic reversal where the emulation of the West transforms into an avenging act laced with antagonism and denigration of the former master.

We further show that the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability comes with a sting in its tail. The post-colonial politics of consumer respectability may partially interrupt colonial relations, but it also reinvigorates them in a neocolonial avatar. The middle-class who bear the ontological wounds of colonial racism (Joshi 2016), perpetuate colorism and classism by directing them internally toward the less privileged in Indian society. Contemporary advertising reduces lower classes and dark-skinned people to degraded objects. We add to Crockett's (2017) work on the politics of consumer respectability by showing its inner contradictions in a post-colonial context. We demonstrate that recoveries from racial injuries are partial and interrupted by neocolonial frames of consumption that pass on ontological wounds to underclass and dark-skinned Indians.

Several consumer researchers have examined how a post-colonial restoration of pride and respect shape responses to the West (Dong and Tian 2009; Kjeldgaard and Askegaard 2006). Consider for instance, Kjeldgaard and Askegaard's (2006) study of Greenlandic youth showing that young people yearn for rock music and information technology because of their universality, which in turn become tools for the expression of local sensibilities. We add to Kjeldgaard and Askegaard's (2006) reading of post-colonial nationalism in veneration of consumption opportunities and in resistance to colonial domination, by drawing attention to how internal hierarchies and center-periphery relationships intersect within the frames of neocolonial consumption. Here, borrowing from Crenshaw (1989), intersectionality implies paying attention to how systems of stratification manifest in society as interconnected phenomena to produce domination. Put differently, our attention to the frames of neocolonial consumption helps to show that intersectional relationship among center-periphery, class differences, and colorism shapes consumer respectability. Instead of separating them, we show that internal class differences are reanimated within the post-colonial grid of center-periphery relations and whiteness. It means that a more complete reading of how hegemonic western consumption flows are adopted, adapted, and resisted in the Global South requires close attention to intersecting socio-economic fault lines and the specific history of repression and humiliation (Crockett 2017; Gopaldas 2013). We argue, building on Rosa-Salas and Sobande (2022), that attention to intersectional relations of center-periphery, colorism, and class helps comprehend how advertising contributes to oppressive structures by furthering the frames of neocolonial consumption in the name of post-colonial restoration of pride and respect.

Such an approach also helps to make some important additions to Dong and Tian's (2009) reading of role of the West in constructing competing versions of national identity. We show that the post-colonial politics of consumer respectability furthers the framing of neocolonial consumption as a class-based and color-based phenomenon that seeks to create light-skinned Indian professionals/elites intending to subvert the colonial master-slave narrative. For example, in the Rajnigandha ad, a rich bourgeois light-skinned male protagonist sets out to buy the British East India Company in London. Similarly, Hero Honda ads exclude under-class and dark-skinned Indians. Thus, the imagination of emergent India framed by degrading the West is not an inclusive battle of the colonized against a colonizer, but a new power structure of neocolonial consumption. We add to Dong and Tian's (2009) reading of restoration of pride through subjugating the West by helping to understand a power structure undergirded by socio-economic fault lines. Further, we show that local resistance cannot be simplistically viewed as an assertion of a subordinate against an old master. Rather, acts of resistance to domination in our context lead to the former subordinates becoming new masters with their own subordinate underclass.

In other words, moving beyond the much-researched and much-reviled cultural imperialism of the West (Petras and Veltmeyer 2007; Tomlinson 2012), we also attend to the internal tyranny of the Global South that is furthered by resistance to colonialism (Arnould 1989; Wilk 1999). This has implications for how past consumer research has understood resistance against Western corporations in the Global South. For example, Varman and Belk (2009) show that a movement against Coca Cola as a Western brand was impelled by *swadeshi*, an ideology of nationalism that is shaped by India's colonial experience. Unlike Varman and Belk (2009), we highlight new circuits of privileges and domination created in the process of resistance and show that a nationalistic idea such as timeless India can be deployed, ironically, to frame neocolonial consumption. Therefore, resistance in the Global South against the "external" West can perversely perpetuate internal inequity.

Finally, we locate the problem of racial epidermal schema as a key element of framing of neocolonial consumption. The emphasis on racial epidermal schema is not about whiteness and racism in their generalized forms (Bonsu 2009; Davis 2018; Grier et al. 2019; Johnson et al. 2019; McClintock 1995; Ramamurthy 2003), but something far more specific. While we agree with these incisive writings on racism, the focus in such analyses is on epidermalization of inferiority which is not the same as racial epidermal schema (Song 2017). Epidermalization of inferiority is about people of color relativizing themselves to the White norm (Song 2017). As a result, there are racial inequities with dependency and desire for whiteness, as we

witness in the production and reception of advertising in India. Racial epidermal schema as a more specific form of racialization happens when a person of color encounters whiteness, which fixes that person's corporeality and consciousness, and restricts the fundamental scope of being and experiencing the world (Fanon 1952). That is, it does not concern the effects of dependency and desire for whiteness as much as their phenomenological causes.

When bodily schema is subtended by racial epidermal schema, as in the frames of post-colonial advertising, a dark-skinned consumer loses the ability to experience the world, develop intentionality, and create a "style." As the Arrow, Fair & Lovely, and Center Fruit ads show in contrasting ways, the perceptual field created by Indian advertisers is steeped in a whiteness that fixes the subordinate position and bodily existence of dark-skinned underclass consumers. Post-colonial advertising frames the perceptual schema in which the dark-skinned are associated with fixed positions of servility. This creates a perceptual field in which dark skin is associated with taboos and the horror of unclean things. It is framed by advertisers as bodies to be kept at a distance. As a result, in contemporary advertising the dark-skinned are robbed of their agency and lived experiences and located in relation to the positions occupied by fair-skinned middle classes. This failure to afford the weight of intentionality to under-class consumers with darker skin is violence and becomes an important structural condition of their oppression in contemporary India. This contributes to the disruption of the bodily schema by racial epidermal schema. The disruption of bodily schema denies an embodied existence and a relationship with the world in which a consumer could attune to the world and adjust non-cognitively to its directives. When a bodily schema is subtended by a racial epidermal schema, dark-skinned consumers lose an intimate and living relationship to the world made up of other bodies (Ahmed and Stacey 2001). As a result of this trauma, the formerly colonized are caught in an infernal circle of historicity and sedimentation (Song 2017). In this circle, the past overwhelms the present at the expense of movement toward a future that might be different from the past. Hence, we see normalization of inequities and the formerly colonized still being determined by the racial-epidermal schema of their stigmatized skin color. Therefore, our analysis of the framing of neocolonial consumption shows a need to attend to how a bodily schema is subtended by epidermal schema, a theme that is overlooked in consumer research.

## CONCLUSIONS

In developing a conceptual understanding of the framing of neocolonial consumption within post-colonial politics of consumer respectability, we uncover demeaning effects of colonialism on consumers and its continued post-colonial

effects on contemporary middle-class Indians who themselves have become an exploiting and oppressive class in contemporary India. We can see these manifestations of post-colonial politics of consumer respectability in many patterns of contemporary consumer culture, including the hierarchical coding of shopping arenas (Varman and Belk 2012), the housing codes of the gated communities that cater to burgeoning middle-class consumers (Brosius 2010), and racially discriminatory marketplaces and marketing practices more generally (Davis 2018). These are sites that allow neocolonial consumption to flourish.

The wider significance of our analysis of the politics of consumer respectability is that studies of consumption in the Global South should closely interrogate the role of neocolonialism in shaping consumer cultures. While we have tried to access narratives from a variety of research participants, our work has certain limitations that require future research. For example, we do not explicitly engage with the under-classes, who should prove essential in more fully understanding a highly stratified and class-based consumer society such as India. Future research on social class and post-colonial consumer culture will need to further differentiate between those consumers who are more at ease with the repertoire of Western references that are present in advertising, and those who are not. There is also fertile ground for future research investigating our findings in other post-colonial societies such as those of South America (Sheriff 2001), the Caribbean (Jones 2015), and Africa (McKaiser 2020). Each post-colonial society is different and we would not expect identical patterns of post-colonial politics of consumer respectability and the framing of neocolonial consumption. But we believe that the scars of colonialism run deep and are difficult to heal without overcoming self-denigration and scapegoating of others through continued colorism and classism. We offer no cures for these problems. But we hope to stimulate further research into the fraught post-colonial politics of consumer respectability and how to break the cycle of the parasitic framing of neocolonial consumption.

## DATA COLLECTION STATEMENT

The first author conducted in-person fieldwork in the winter of 2008 in New Delhi. The third author conducted in-person fieldwork in the summer of 2009 in Kolkata, in the summer of 2010 in Belgaum, and in the summer and winter of 2019 in Trichy. All the cities mentioned here are in India. The data were analyzed jointly by the three authors. The data are currently stored in a directory on Research Box.

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