

The Nuances of Bengali Identity Construction  
Among Dhaka's Affluent Middle Class

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Economics and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
BSS in Anthropology

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## **Declaration**

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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## **Approval**

The thesis titled “The Nuances of Bengali Identity Construction Among Dhaka’s Affluent Middle Class” submitted by Amarraah Ahamd og Summer, 2024 has been accepted as satisfactory in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of BSS in Anthropology on 04-07-2024.

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## **Ethics Statement**

This thesis is a piece of original academic work. All interviews have been recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participating interlocutors.

## **Abstract**

This auto-ethnographic thesis examines how members of Dhaka's affluent middle class, aged 22 to 36, conceptualise their Bengali identities through consumption and representation. This study recognises the fluid nature of identity and that it is in constant production over time. Continuous interaction with historical presences and the contemporary forces of globalisation in a neo-colonial era has resulted in a hybrid and syncretic Bengali identity. Seeking to answer the following research questions: (1) how does the affluent middle class perceive and conceptualise their identity? (2) How are they constituting their identity through their material consumption? Lastly, (3) do particular representations help them achieve certain distinctions; this study relies on Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital to explore the class markers based on each interlocutor's family units, qualifications, and preferences for material consumption. This narrative is cross-examined with Hall's notions of 'oneness' and 'becoming' to understand the nuances that may arise when Bengali identities are represented on the market.

**Keywords:** Dhaka; Affluent Middle Class; Bengali Identity; Neo-colonialism; Habitus; Capital; Consumption; Narrative; Representation; Market.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Bangladesh is still considered a relatively young nation at a mere fifty-three years old, while the history of its people can be traced back four millennia. Having been subjected to foreign influences as early as the 8th century, Bangladesh today is a melting pot of rich heritage and culture. Having witnessed multiple historical presences, from the Mughal Empire to the British Raj and the Pakistani regime, Bengali identity is a production of cultural hybridity and ethnic multiplicity (Zahin & Nion, 2023). Following the nation's independence, the early decades saw economic reforms and open market policies, welcoming further foreign intervention into the ways of the Bengali people. Moreover, in the era of neo-colonialism<sup>1</sup> and the internet, Bangladesh's capital, Dhaka, may be considered a poster child for globalisation, with the emergent urban affluent middle class at its forefront.

Over two decades, the affluent middle class has positioned themselves as the dominant group, establishing sociocultural and economic hegemony across Dhaka, altering lifestyles and increasing modes of consumption, choice, and mobility (Karim, 2012). The members of Dhaka's affluent middle class are potent consumers and outliers from their predecessors. Influenced by their income surplus, they are responsive to the forces of globalisation and exposure to powerful media (Roy, 2018). It is noteworthy that these forces have brought foreign influences (both Western and others) into the consumption patterns of this class. This, adjunct to the colonial

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<sup>1</sup> Neo-colonialism: the final form colonialism that drives the imperial agenda. Neo-colonialism indirectly intervenes in the socio-economic and political systems of sovereign developing nations.



experience, has resulted in this social group straying away from the traditional understanding of what it means to be Bengali.

Consumption has long been considered in the realm of identity construction (Shankar et al., 2009; Wijetunga, 2015). Consumption and its intersection with identity is highly contested in social theory; it was believed that identity was prescribed and fixed, however, post-structural theory suggests that identity can be negotiated (Shankar et al., 2009). Furthermore, Shankar and his associates suggest that in the post-modern world, people actively construct their identities through symbolic means of varying brands and lifestyle pursuits, allowing consumption to become the arena for the production, reproduction and representation of the self. As such, individuals negotiate their identity and status through the products they consume or reject (Wijetunga, 2015).

Moreover, as Wijetunga (2015) suggests, a consumer culture exists at the core of today's society, insofar as the culture of consumption has become an integral part of social practices and cultural values, ideas, aspirations and identity. The emerging consumer culture and how it continues to evolve allows for conspicuous consumption through which members of the affluent middle class confer their status to convey social differences (Gregson & Ferdous, 2015). Moreover, the recent mobilisation towards anti-consumerist and ethical consumption practices has also become a means of achieving such distinction (Shankar et al., 2009). Taking this into consideration, this thesis attempts to understand how the affluent middle class construct their cultural identity through the means of consumption and achieve distinction on the market.

## **Dhaka's Affluent Middle Class & Their Identity**

Dhaka's affluent middle class comprises white-collar professionals who have accumulated different forms of capital and benefited from the opportunities stemming from the liberalisation of Bangladesh (Sabur, 2014). However, the affluent middle class is an enigma whose parameters are extremely nuanced and difficult to define within income brackets. In a 2020 article titled '*Who are the middle class in Bangladesh?*', The Business Standard's Masum Billah refers to Dr Binayak Sen; a researcher and the director general at Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Sen notes while there is no universally accepted definition of the middle class, he considers an income of 2 to 4 USD per day to be standard for this class in Bangladesh and the global South (Billah, 2020).

According to Sen, for a middle-class family of four, the average monthly income ranges from 70,000 to 150,000 BDT; however, when the same income range is considered for a two-member household, they would be classified to be quite well off by middle-class standards (Billah, 2020). Factors such as varying family configuration (number of family members, income streams and members who earn) make it difficult to establish a specific income bracket to define the middle class. Moreover, Karim (2012) suggests that Dhaka's middle-class income spectrum is too wide, insofar as one may position themselves at varying income levels at different stages of life. It is suggested that the affluent middle class is an assumed class identity that one carries as a part of their family legacy (Roy, 2018). Holding on to middle-class values, members of this class achieve and maintain their morality by gaining more capital. To understand this, we must first look at the emergence of the urban middle class in Dhaka.

Following Bangladesh gaining independence in 1971, its borders were opened to foreign investments and aid. Economic reforms and open market policies led to the liberalisation of the economy, expanding and exposing the local market to consumption abroad. This allowed globalisation to be integrated into the production, distribution and marketing of local products (Khan, 2013). In addition to this, the 1990s was a time of increasing international migration, be it for trade, labour or even permanent residence, leading to a rising inflow of foreign currency. This in conjunction with the aforementioned economic reforms was crucial in expanding the private sector and securing the middle class' emergence. Initially, this class was made up of small-time traders, salaried government officials, private entrepreneurs and other professionals; heavily dependent on acquiring education and skills that would aid in their upward mobility towards achieving middle-class status (Karim, 2012; Sabur, 2014). However, the urban middle class of the 1990s is gravely different from how we see it today.

Today, the urban middle class is even more elusive than ever before. It is even more difficult to define them within an income bracket, thus the affluent middle-class today may be considered a Weberian status group; heterogeneous, disassociated from manual labour, invested in education and putting high regard on the mastery over English (Gregson & Ferdous, 2015). More than anything, the classification as middle class exists as a self-identification mechanism among the members and as a cultural understanding in terms of the values and norms held. It exists as self-perceived refined behaviour with cultivated taste, not equating to wealth or power irrespective of profession or the area lived in; it is used as a maker to differentiate and position themselves as the liberalised dominant class with socio-cultural hegemony (Karim, 2012). This resulted in altered lifestyle and consumption patterns, not just their own but also their

communities. Furthermore, the affluent middle class has played a seminal role in negotiating and transforming gender relations and power dynamics across households thus far in the 21st century (Karim, 2012).

Whilst few may still hail from joint households, Dhaka's affluent middle class predominantly comprises nuclear families; lacking extensions, these families have diminishing kinship and property ties outside Dhaka (Rahman, 2007). This distancing from rural Bangladesh, in addition to the advent of globalisation, has led the identity issue among the members of this social class to have undergone a fair amount of reformation (Shahed, 2013). In their 2023 article, Zahin & Nion raise the question of how to identify one's self as Bengali, they conclude there is no fixed characteristic unique enough to be coined as Bengali. While notions of race and ethnicity do play a role in establishing identity, the role of culture, religion and language are more definitive (Shahed, 2013). Shahid notes within an urban space, it is impossible to avoid the imposition of globalisation on culture; creating a constant struggle between global, local and religious traditions, resulting in a distorted perception of cultural identity. This remains especially true when considering that contemporary Bengali identity is understood in conjunction with and intimately interwoven with the Bangla language and the prevalence of Islam.

### **Where Identity and Consumption Intersect**

Social sciences have moved away from essentialist perspectives towards post-structuralism, wherein the conceptualisation of identity is no longer considered a unitary or fixed construct. Shankar et al (2009) suggest as identity has been freed from structural constraints, individuals can now determine and 'make up' who they want to be. Identity

construction today is viewed as a project requiring constant negotiation; facilitated by the market, material goods are not only used to express but instead to negotiate an idealised version of the identity. Shankar and associates further note that the relationship between consumption and identity is symbolic, self-expressivist, and communicative, allowing consumers to alter their consumption patterns as their identities develop and change at different stages of life.

The fact is that the things we consume and possess are symbolic. They represent not only the values we hold and the norms we practise but also which social groupings we belong. Collective shared symbols are vital to constructing identity; they offer a sense of self, community and belonging, reflecting what particular social groupings accept and/or reject (Shankar et al., 2009). These shared symbols and their significance result in consumers continually opting for them, and are established through the interactions of one's habitus, marketing and individual consumption preferences. Furthermore, what we consume and where we consume from has a spillover effect on conventionally non-consumption areas such as education or social life (both private and public), resulting in more and more aspects of our life becoming produced and reproduced as commodities (Wijetunga, 2015).

As aforementioned, Wijetunga (2015) concluded that in today's consumer society, consumption occupies a dominant space, wherein, consumption is at the core of social practice and cultural values, ideas and aspirations. Identities are defined in relation to what we consume; however, recently, we have witnessed many opting to stray away from this narrative driven by both materialistic and idealistic interests (Hansson, 2018). Similar to the relationship between consumption and identity, a shift towards rejecting consumption practices, also known as

anti-consumerism, may be equally definitive to one's identity project. In their 2018 thesis, Hansson suggests that individuals are becoming increasingly aware of the unsustainable and exploitative nature that is perpetuated within the current state of the consumer market. The problem of overconsumption and mass production has led many to reflect upon the market influences and their power over their consumption habits; renouncing them, anti-consumerists reject, restrict and reclaim their consumption (Hansson, 2018). Anti-consumerism may be conceptualised as either resistance, boycotting, ethical consumption, and/or non-consumption; however, at the centre of them all is the desire to reject the status quo of consumerism (Hansson, 2018).

### **Research Questions**

Through an auto-ethnographic study, this paper seeks to understand how individuals, aged 22 to 36, from Dhaka's affluent middle class conceptualise their Bengali identities while navigating the nuances of the consumer market. Set against the context of my overall objective, this paper aims to answer the following three board research questions:

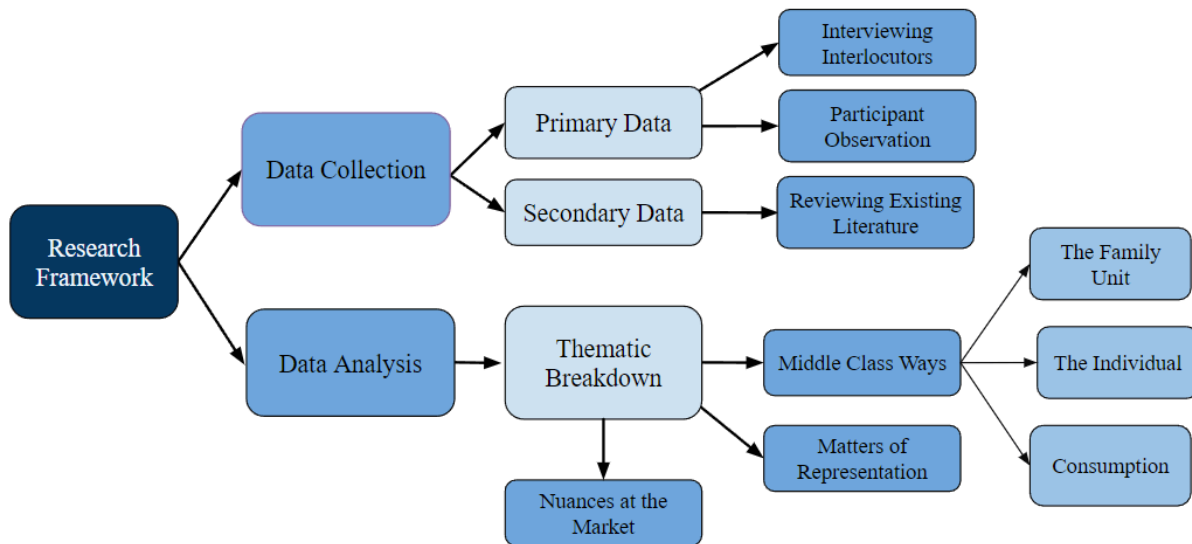
1. How does the affluent middle class perceive and conceptualise their identity?
2. How are they constituting their identity through their material consumption?
3. Do particular representations help them achieve certain distinctions?

## Chapter 2

### Research Framework

This study examines the complicated intersection of the affluent middle class and Bengali cultural identity. Whilst the former is a relatively new concept in the realm of discourse on Bangladeshi people, the latter and its evolving conceptualisation can be traced back to millennia. While this research began by exploring these two concepts and their relationship with consumption within the existing literature, this chapter additionally outlines the theoretical framework, methodology and analytical framework upon which this thesis has been constructed. Figure 1 illustrates a flow chart of my research framework:

**Figure 1: Research Framework flowchart**



## **Theoretical Framework**

Consumption and consumer behaviour have long been considered within the realm of identity construction. Shankar et al., in their 2009 article titled *'Identity, consumption and narratives of socialisation'*, introspectively debate the relationship between identity and consumption. By utilising their participants' past consumption of music albums as an archive for their identity projects, Shankar et al. attempt to ascertain how their participants make up their identities. Similarly, in their 2015 article, Dinuka Wijetunga discusses the relationship between identity and consumption, relying on a study of mobile telephone usage patterns in Sri Lanka to deduce how consumers have different consumption patterns to distinguish them from others.

While both Shankar et al, (2009) and Wijetunga (2015) explore how identity construction is facilitated by the consumer market, Hasson (2018) maintains that anti-consumerist beliefs may be equally definitive to one's identity. In her thesis titled *'Anti-consumption and Identity - How the rejection of consumption can be identity constructing'*, Hasson explores how their participants come to explore and then internalise anti-consumerist beliefs as reactions to varying humanitarian and environmental qualms and how it goes on to affect their identity construction. While Hasson (2018) goes on to conceptualise anti-consumerism as resistance, boycotting and/or non-consumption, Khan (2013) and Gregson & Ferdous (2015) shift their focus to the transforming local market in the face of globalisation. While Khan primarily discusses social and structural changes, Gregson & Ferdous examine the changing consumption patterns of Dhaka's growing urban middle class.



From the beginning of their article, Gregson & Ferdous (2015) clearly states that Bangladesh's middle class plays an essential role in the nation's overall consumer culture. As the emergent class, the urban middle class and their consumption patterns influenced by economic liberalisation had mobilised and challenged what the global North had understood by the term 'ethical consumption'. They note that the understanding of ethical consumption gravely varies between the global North and South. They exemplify Bangladesh's 2013 Rana Plaza disaster and brands such as Aarong catering to the middle class, suggesting that ethical consumption exists in Bangladesh but as ordinary consumption with ethical effects. Gregson & Ferdous' paper has played a significant role in determining my research trajectory. Their discussion of the Bangladeshi middle class and its intersection with the notion of ethical consumption was seminal to the early stage development of this research.

Despite appropriately identifying this emergent urban middle class as a relatively wealthy status group who made significant investments in education and English, Gregson & Ferdous' classification of the urban middle class lacked several aspects. To gain a better understanding, we can turn to Siddiquir Rahman (2007), Shuchi Karim (2012), Seuty Sabur (2014) and Rituparna Roy (2018), who provide a more extensive conceptualisation of this elusive status group. Across these four pieces, the authors have commonly classified the urban middle class as a self-identification mechanism among the members and as a cultural understanding of the values and norms. They are made up of English-speaking, white-collar professionals who have accumulated different forms of capital, benefiting from the opportunities stemming from the liberalisation of Bangladesh. They have a self-perceived refined behaviour with cultivated taste, not equating to wealth or power irrespective of the profession or area lived in; it is used as a

marker to differentiate and position themselves as the liberalised dominant class having socio-cultural hegemony.

This hegemony has allowed the urban middle class not only to transform gender relations, representation and power dynamics but also to alter the perception of their own Bengali cultural identity. Zahin & Nion (2023), in their paper '*Bengali Cultural Identity in Post-Colonial Era: An Analysis of Bengali Cultural Representations*' examine the historical presences, hybridity and fluidity inherent in Bengali cultural identity. Zahin & Nion (2023) maintain that no cultural identity can sit freely without being subjected to foreign influences. They rely on Hall's two perspectives of cultural identity to establish the existence of two overarching presences in the Bengali cultural identity: a pre-colonial presence and a British presence. Examining various artefacts from the two historical presences, Zahin & Nion (2023) attempt to ascertain how the interaction with foreign influence has shaped Bengali culture.

Attempting to discern the conceptualisation of an affluent middle-class identity, this study refers to Pierre Bourdieu's *La Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1984) and his notions on habitus and capital. Bourdieu defines habitus as a system of dispositions, innate habits, appreciations and preferences that is a product of one's socialisation process. Being a generative mechanism, the habitus helps one shape their preferences and judgement, leading them to value a certain schema that conforms to a particular social structure based on their class, education, and religion in addition to individual life experiences (Bourdieu, 1984). Whilst one's habitus is essentially second nature, the capital one holds are the resources at one's disposal. Bourdieu divides capital into the following three categories:

- a. Economic capital: financial resources and material wealth
- b. Cultural capital: educational qualifications, skills, knowledge and taste
- c. Social capital: a network of social relations, connections and other social resources

It is worth noting that while one's habitus is ingrained and may be inherited from one's family, one can acquire and negotiate all three categories of capital at varying stages of life. This is precisely the course of action taken by Dhaka's emergent middle class to secure their position as the dominant class with socio-cultural hegemony. In maintaining this hegemony, the affluent middle class prioritises the concept of households, their membership, entitlement and legacy, and acquiring education and income from respectable professions (Karim, 2012). Moreover, in regard to consumption, Bourdieu (1984) argues that what we consume is not merely about individual preferences but also is deeply rooted in one's habitus. One's habitus seeks to reinforce one's social structure and distinctions even during consumption. What one consumes and from where can reflect and reproduce cultural and class differences, resulting in the individual consumer picking and choosing, to negotiate, the object that represents themselves the best (Bourdieu, 1984)

Bourdieu (1984) exemplifies the consumption of art and cinema among professionals. Using the preferences for different genres of art and cinema as a measure of cultural capital, he claims that professionals such as architects, barristers and doctors choose the rarest works and the most intellectual films; whilst ordinary employees would prefer films of "the most banal and middlebrow taste". Bourdieu (1984) insists the difference between these two groupings is linked

to the distribution of capital among each of these professionals, however, it becomes difficult to draw particular distinctions among roughly equal individuals. He suggests although these two groups of professionals occupy the same space, the differences that arise among them are based on two factors: first, the structure and the relative weight of economic and cultural capital possessed, and second, the individual life trajectory through which corresponding acquisition and governance takes place.

Nevertheless, ultimately one's preferences for what they consume come down to their ingrained dispositions as passed down through one's family and their membership to the dominant class. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that families who have been long members of the dominant class have certain familiarisations and longstanding markers of the bourgeoisie. Whereas, members who have recently joined the dominant class owe their distinction to the acquisition of educational qualifications and in turn gaining substantial economic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). The classifications of Dhaka's affluent middle class recognise these criteria, placing importance on acquiring education and achieving an income surplus. The affluent middle class recognises the regenerative nature of capital, that one may employ their economic capital to obtain higher cultural capital and in turn, more economic capital.

On the other hand in the case of Bengali identities and as it perpetuates, set again the hegemonic middle class identity in addition to the colonial experience and the forces of globalisation; we have to take into account how such impositions have transformed our conceptualisation of it. In his 1990 essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Stuart Hall defines identity as a 'production' that is never complete, always in process, and constituted within, not

outside, representation. He suggests we look at identity, specifically cultural identity, from two different but related perspectives. The first perspective insists we look at identity as one shared culture, a collective “one true self”, wherein our cultural identities reflect the common historical experience and shared codes, providing us as ‘one people’ with stable and unchanging frames of reference. Hall connotes that such ‘oneness’ may seem superficial; however, a shared history allows for the rediscovery and reconstruction of a diminished cultural identity through representation (Hall, 1990).

Hall’s second perspective recognises that there may be a shared collective history, but he looks for the critical points of differences, insisting we should focus on who we can become (Hall, 1990). This second perspective allows us to view cultural identities as a matter of positionality, insisting that attention should be drawn to what it can become instead of focusing on what it was. This perspective of identity understands that cultural identity is a production. It recognises its fluid nature, insisting that identity is shaped by culture, power and, most importantly, the passage of time. Hall suggests that while individuals from the same ethnicity may share many points of similarities, critical points of deep and significant differences arise when we confront ‘what we are’ and ‘what we have become’.

In his essay, Hall primarily exemplifies the migration and displacement among African diasporas and focuses on how their cultural identities were shaped in the face of culture, power and colonial history. He suggests as diasporic cultural identities encounter new foreign cultural practices and social structures, continual interaction allows for the emergence of new hybridised and syncretic forms of identity. While Hall’s notion of ‘oneness’ may be used to consider how

particular markers of Bengali identity have prevailed in the face of historical and neo-colonial intervention, the notion of ‘becoming’ allows us to understand how the modern Bengali identities go to be represented on a globalised market.

## **Methodology**

Within this exploratory study, I aim to see how individuals construct their Bengali identity whilst being members of the affluent middle class. In an effort to build an accurate narrative of how members of this class construct their identity, this study utilised a combination of both secondary and primary research. To build a qualitative thesis through my primary research, I initially conducted my secondary research by reviewing the literature available among relevant academic books and journal publications. Reviewing the literature has allowed me to set the tone and direction that this thesis took, enabling me to thematically design an appropriate questionnaire. This in turn would help me to construct a narrative attempting to understand the class and cultural makers as one constructs their identity through consumption and the market. With a questionnaire, I was ready to commence the primary research through participant interviews and observation. The following outlines my fieldwork experience:

### **1. Participant Interviews & Observation**

As previously stated in the objective, this thesis is auto-ethnographic in nature. I will be the first to admit I am very much the product of an affluent middle-class upbringing, struggling to come to terms with my Bengali identity. For my research, I wanted to interview individuals from a similar socioeconomic background; however, to remain unbiased by having preexisting knowledge of their life experiences, I opted out of recruiting individuals I knew personally. My

interlocutors were selected on a snowballing basis, wherein I asked my peers to refer me to their friends and family. I had asked my peers to strictly maintain my desire to be unfamiliar with the potential interlocutors, referring me to four women and four men aged 22 to 36.

Seven of my eight interlocutors are young professionals, while one is a postgraduate student. Considering their busy schedules, I contacted them through WhatsApp to schedule interviews. With each interlocutor, I had initially insisted upon in-person interviews to best grasp their essence in their natural environments. However, I readily accepted if they were uncomfortable doing so. Four of my eight interlocutors invited me into their homes, and one met me at a cafe near his home in Banani. The remaining three interviews were conducted online over Google Meet. With their consent, I conducted and recorded semi-structured interviews, each ranging from 40 to 50 minutes. These interviews were held between the 10th of March and the 30th, with some requiring follow-up questioning, which were easily resolved through WhatsApp messages or Google Meet.

Outside of my eight semi-structured interviews, following my interview with the second interlocutor, Raiyan, I was invited to attend his community engagement project, ' Orion's Sessions'. He had informed me that this would be the project's 9th discussion session and they would be discussing the prompt "Bengali Identity in the 21st Century". He insisted that I hear several interesting takes from diverse individuals, convincing me to attend. I agreed in hopes of acquiring some supplementary information and perspectives. The session took place at Ramna Park and was attended by roughly 30 to 40 people, lasting about 2 hours. I have considered the event a participant observation in addition to my primary eight participant interviews.

## **2. Analytical Framework**

One of my early hypotheses for this thesis inquired if members of the affluent middle class felt a sense of disconnection from their Bengali identity and, consequently, what measures were taken to maintain their identity. This question was the perfect starting point in formulating my three primary research questions. Despite the primary questions having a set sequence according to which the fieldwork questionnaire was designed; I thought it important to highlight the two separate identities at play here: the middle-class and Bengali identities. The separation of these two identities allows us to look at how the two individual identities are negotiated through the lens of consumption and eventually brought together to construct a whole.

Consumption remains central as I proceed to analyse the fieldwork findings. Utilising each of the interlocutor's preferences and beliefs surrounding consumption in conjunction with, first their habitus and capital distribution and, second, the changing forms of representation on the market; this thesis aims to understand how members of the affluent middle class negotiate their identity and ultimately draw certain distinctions. The following provides an analytical framework to understand how the two identities are negotiated, their intersection and how they draw distinctions:

- a. Ways of the Middle Class: to distinguish the affluent middle-class identities in relation to  
- the family unit, the individual and through consumption preferences
- b. Matters of Representation: to conceptualise Bengali identity among the affluent middle-class



- c. The Nuances at the Market: to examine the various nuances that may arise when the two identities intersect based on consumption and the market

It must be noted that in the early development stage of this research, the terms ‘Bangali’ and ‘Bangladeshi’ were used interchangeably. Traditionally, these two terms refer to two opposing political orientations: the first is based on language, and the second is on religious beliefs (Uddin & Nesa, 2020). Nevertheless, this paper will use the term ‘Bengali’ as it encompasses an ethnolinguistic and cultural identity. Moreover, despite aiming to ascertain how the affluent middle class conceptualises their Bengali identity, this study has never claimed to understand what Bengali culture is or was. It is impossible to account for all of Bengali culture as it may look different across various regions of Bengal and during different periods. A fixed measure or understanding of Bengaliness has never existed. Nevertheless, this study aims to understand what it means to be Bengali among the affluent middle class as an approximation of the Bengali culture as it exists within the parameters of Dhaka city.

### **My Intervention**

Although the discussion of identity in Bangladesh is not novel, research thus far predominantly focuses on nationalistic notions of Bangali versus Bangladeshi. Most discuss the significance of the Bangla Language and the prevalence of Islam, some texts do touch upon rural identities and class relations; however, very few discuss cultural identity amongst the affluent middle class. As of recently, a handful of articles have been detailing the emergence of Dhaka’s affluent middle class, but there is a gap in the discussion of how middle-class identities intersect with their cultural Bengali identity. While Bengali identity is commonly associated with rural imagery, this

socioeconomic status group's consumption practices and lifestyle pursuits often resemble the West. With surplus incomes and the most responsive to the forces of globalisation, the affluent middle class are outliers from their predecessors and counterparts. This study aims to ascertain how this particular social class constructs its Bengali identity through consumption and to understand the nuances that may arise from such an intersection.

### **Challenges & Limitations**

As I have stated, I wanted to study individuals from a similar socio-economic background as my own. Due to the auto-ethnographic nature of this thesis, I am well aware of the problem of positionality that may arise due to inherent biases. During the interview, it was difficult not to draw automatic conclusions when the interlocutors shared their stories, as much of their experiences reflected my own. Moreover, it must be said that this research and its subject area are innately limiting. Focusing on a specific configuration of the dominant 'Bengali Muslim' and 'affluent middle class' identities in Dhaka, this study forgoes other minority ethno-religious experiences as they conform to Bangladesh's hegemonic Bengali Muslim population.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Ways of the Middle-Class**

Dhaka's affluent middle class has cemented themselves as the hegemonic class. Marked by white-collar professions, a mastery of English and association with like-minded individuals of polished culture, these middle-class families uphold particular refined behaviour and conduct irrespective of household income and location of residence. Members from this class have a more expansive and global cultural capital, often in the form of degrees and qualifications from foreign institutions (Rahman, 2007). The regenerative nature of capital allows members of this class to acquire, adopt and increase their access to economic and cultural capital, allowing their consumption and lifestyles to resemble the West. This chapter thus attempts to decipher each of the interlocutor's family units, individual qualifications and consumption to discern how they distinguish themselves as a member of the affluent middle class.

#### **1. The Family Unit**

The family is the smallest unit, where the class is produced and reproduced through accumulation and consumption, and gender roles are reinforced. I have examined the family as the unit of my analysis to understand such phenomena. There exists a silent but obvious understanding families from this social group are not necessarily 'middle class', suggesting they hold certain 'affluence'. They may have come from humble beginnings; however, specific class markers differentiate this class from both the societal elites and the lower classes (Karim, 2012). In a previous chapter, this study established that the identification of a middle-class family member worked as a self-identification mechanism. This fact remained true when the

interlocutors were asked how one identifies, each telling me stories of shared family meals or ties they could not forgo. Across all 8 interlocutors, family and household membership remained central during their self-identification process. Whilst a few explicitly stated, *“I am a Bengali Muslim from a middle-class family”*, a portion of them told me about the values their families upheld and their parents' sacrifices.

Parents often cite their upbringing and struggles, (especially economic) as a benchmark for their children to aspire towards, wishing for them to excel beyond the dispositions they have provided thus far. This, coupled with the addition of the tag ‘middle class’, provides contextual information about one’s identity and the habitus they were born into. Among this class, a good and tertiary education has always been seen as the definitive route to future stability and success. Parents from such households are willing to invest considerable economic capital in their children’s education, encouraging them to gain academic qualifications. The parents’ educational and consequent occupational background was instrumental in establishing this habitus.

Table 1.1 illustrates the interlocutors’ habitus based on their family unit and the location of residence. Across all 8 interlocutors, all the fathers hold a Bachelor’s degree at minimum and 2 have additional master’s degrees. 7 of the 8 mothers hold bachelor’s and 3 have master’s degrees as well. While some parents have now retired, the fathers are or were employed as either government employees, businessmen or in the private sector. Of the 8, 3 mothers are educators while 1 has retired from the social welfare sector and the remaining 4 are homemakers. Ayela notes,

*“Ma is a homemaker. She’s an accountant by trade. She has a master’s in accounting, in fact, she’s the most educated one in our family unit... She had a job, but she gave it up*

*when she became pregnant with me and wanted to run the household. It is important work but it is so sad that there is no formal recognition for it.”*

**Table 1.1: Interlocutors’ Habitus Based on Family Units**

	Father		Mother		Family Residence
	Education	Occupation	Education	Occupation	
<b>Ayela (22)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, University of Rajshahi.	Engineer, Government Officer	Master’s degree, Sirajganj College.	Homemaker	Dhanmondi, rented.
<b>Raiyan (26)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	Consultant, Consultancy firm owner	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	College-level educator	Banani, owned
<b>Mahenaz (36)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, University of Rajshahi	Retired from private tea garden	Higher degree graduate	Homemaker	Mirpur DOHS, rented
<b>Nahian (29)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	Businessman	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	Homemaker	Uttara, owned
<b>Atif (28)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	Retired government officer, private sector officer	Bachelor’s degree, University of Chittagong	Retired Social Welfare officer	Dhaka Cantonment, owned
<b>Tahmeed (23)</b>	Master’s degree, University of Arkansas	Managing Director, private RMG company	Master’s degree, University of Dhaka	Homemaker	Baridhara, owned
<b>Fahim (27)</b>	Bachelor’s degree, Jagannath University	Retired government officer	Bachelor’s degree, University of Dhaka	Freelancer and educator	Dhanmondi, owned
<b>Rezwana (24)</b>	Master’s degree, University of Central Arkansas	Executive, private manufacturing company	Master’s degree, University of Central Arkansas	University- level educator	Banani and Gulshan, separately owned.

Despite holding well-to-do educational qualifications themselves, these 4 mothers have opted to be homemakers of their own accord. Among the affluent middle class, women have the privilege of such a choice; however, this is often not the reality for the majority of the Bangladeshi female population. Women of lower socio-economic status frequently do not have this choice, either being thrust into the workforce out of necessity to provide for the family or

confined to the domestic sphere by religious notions such as the *purdah*. Even if working women are financially contributing to the family, they still bear the bulk of household chores, including cooking, cleaning and caring for dependents; work that is essential but goes unrecognised by the formal economy.

## **2. The Individual: Education and Occupation**

Nevertheless, when it comes to their own children, parents are willing to make such sacrifices to ensure their futures, aiming to provide a head start to their identity projects and capital accumulation. This begins with the schools they are sent to. While most of the nation's school-aged children are sent to national curriculum Bangla medium schools and a small percentage to Islamic Madrasas, the children from affluent middle-class families are predominantly sent to private English medium schools. Except for a singular Bangla language class, the primary language of instruction is English, leading many to feel considerably less proficient and comfortable communicating in Bangla. Such a sentiment is echoed by Raiyan, he states,

*“I was traumatised from the experience of going to an English medium school. I feel like there was a homogenisation project among them, where we were chastised for speaking Bangla”*

Including Raiyan, 7 interlocutors attended English medium schools, whilst Atif attended a Bangla medium school. After completing secondary school, all students are expected to enrol in universities to obtain a bachelor's degree at minimum, either from a state university (the University of Dhaka and its constituent institutions), a private university, or a foreign university.

While a degree from the University of Dhaka is still held in high regard, most affluent middle-class families aspire to send their children to pursue their tertiary education abroad, with a majority aiming for North America, Europe and Australia. Students are encouraged to secure academic scholarships, but as mentioned earlier more than often, parents will invest considerable amounts of money into their child’s education. Of the 8 interlocutors 7 have already obtained a Bachelor’s degree; 3 at universities abroad and 4 from private universities in Dhaka. Among these 7, 2 were or are currently pursuing a postgraduate degree and Rezwana, who graduated last year and is currently employed, is looking forward to starting her post-graduate degree in the upcoming academic year.

**Table 1.2: Interlocutors’ Academic and Occupational Backgrounds**

<b>Name (age)</b>	<b>Secondary School</b>	<b>Bachelor’s Degree</b>	<b>Master’s Degree</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Range of Income (monthly)</b>
<b>Ayela (22)</b>	Mastermind School, Dhaka	n/a		Business owner and designer; Poptags & Project Janky	Varies due to the nature of business. No income until April, but then 25,000 BDT between May

					and June
<b>Raiyan (26)</b>	DPS STS School, Dhaka	The University of Melbourne, Australia		Research associate, artist and community organiser; BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health	55,000 BDT across all sources of income
<b>Mahenaz (36)</b>	Aga Khan School, Dhaka	North South University	Independent University Bangladesh (completed)	Designer, business owner, consultant and community organiser; Broqué	Varies, but on average 1,00,000 BDT
<b>Nahian (29)</b>	Aga Khan School, Dhaka	North South University		Event planner, business owner and interior designer; Trievents	On average, 1,45,000 BDT across all sources of income
<b>Atif (28)</b>	Government Laboratory High School, Dhaka	North South University		Executive Director; Medinatech Limited and Dr. Chashi Inc	1,00,000 BDT from 2 sources of income
<b>Tahmeed (23)</b>	DPS STS School, Dhaka	The University of Waterloo, Canada		Management associate; Northern Fashion Ltd.	40,000 BDT
<b>Fahim (28)</b>	Australian International School, Dhaka	Independent University Bangladesh	Independent University Bangladesh (ongoing)	Student; Internship; Eastern Bank PLC (previously)	No income at the moment
<b>Rezwana (24)</b>	Green Dale International School, Dhaka	Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, Japan	Currently applying for the academic year 2025-26	Communications associate; ACIDI/VOCA	60,000 BDT

Table 1.2 illustrates the educational and occupational backgrounds of the 8 interlocutors. Among the 8, Ayela has decided not to pursue tertiary education and was initially disappointed when she opted away from the norm. Ayela recognises that among Dhaka’s middle class, there exists only one acceptable blueprint for success which is higher education. She remembers her parents’ reactions and defeat when she received her poor A-level results. Nevertheless, Ayela had always wanted to work in a creative field. She shared that she never felt like she learnt anything practical in a traditional classroom setting, and if she had learnt something, it was on her own time from the internet. Thus after high school, Ayela established Poptags and Project Janky, two online businesses in 2020 and 2023 respectively. She states,



*“I told my parents that I did not want to go to university...they were so concerned and disapproving, it took them a while to come around to the idea. They only came around to it when I started making significant money from what I was doing...I was making a lot of money quickly, and when they took notice, they slowly calmed down about my education. The whole point of “further education”, is to get a job and make money. I already am, so what’s wrong?”*

To an extent, Ayela’s perception of the importance of education among the affluent middle class is correct. Recognising the regenerative nature of capital, she negotiates and disregards education from her identity project, aiming to maximise both her capital (economic and cultural) unconventional means. Ayela and a couple of the other interlocutors note that growing up, their families were not as well off as they are now; however, they all acknowledge their inherent dispositions resulting from their parents’ efforts, admitting they had comfortable middle-class upbringings.

Now, as adults, most of the interlocutors are employed and still live with their parents. Table 1.1 also highlights the location of each of the family residences and where 7 of the 8 interlocutors live. Of the 7, 3 live in the tri-state area (Banani, Gulshan and Baridhara), which is canonically perceived as Dhaka’s most affluent neighbourhood. Among the remaining 4, 2 live in Dhanmondi, an old neighbourhood with rich heritage and 2 in Cantonment and Mirpur DOHS; both diplomatic military zones. The only exception is Nahian who got married last year and now rents an apartment in Uttara, one of Dhaka’s fastest-growing suburbs. At 29, Nahian is the co-founder of an event-planning business. She credits her father and uncle for her business mindset as she strayed away from the family business to make a name for herself. Like Nahian,

Ayela and Mahenaz are also entrepreneurs, whilst 3 interlocutors are employed in the private sector, 1 in a non-profit organisation and 1, Fahim, is a full-time post-graduate student.

### **3. Consumption**

In Bangladesh, it is the norm for unmarried adult children to continue living with their parents even if they are financially capable of moving out. Karim (2012) suggests that while adult children of affluent families still live with and are considered dependent on their parents, their income remains independent from the household. They live rent-free and are provided with daily meals, making their income a surplus for the household. This financial independence has allowed adult children to freely determine how to employ their income. While some save for their future, most employ their income to fund their social lives and consumption independent of the household. Ayela says,

*“Yes I do live with them and they provide me with food at home, but for my other needs, be it clothes or my social life; I do not have to ask my parents for money anymore.”*

Table 1.2 additionally discloses each of the interlocutor’s average monthly income. Raiyan, Rezwana and Tahmeed, who had graduated from universities abroad in between 2022 and 2023, earn between 40,000 to 60,000 BDT; higher than the monthly average income for a fresh graduate as reported by The Daily Star (2022). While these interlocutors earn a steady flow of income, Ayela suggests due to the nature of her businesses, her income varies from month to month. She reports virtually no income in the first 4 months of 2024, but a sudden inflow of 25,000 BDT in between May and June after designing a few commissioned pieces for an up and coming musician under her label Project Janky. On the other end of the spectrum Nahian, who is

older and more established in her career, reports earning a combined 145,000 BDT monthly from her business and freelance work.

Fahim, the postgraduate student, currently reports no income. He mentions his parents fund both his lifestyle and education while he is still engaged in academia. The remaining interlocutors are not currently engaged in education and unanimously claim to be financially independent from their parents in regards to consumption independent of the household. Aged between 22 and 36, the interlocutors note that their primary expenditures are, in fact, associated with funding their social lives. Whether hosting, spending quality time with friends and family, dining out or commuting to and from; maintaining a social life remains an essential expenditure across all 8 interlocutors. Raiyan notes,

*“I think my biggest areas of consumption are food and socialising, which are my biggest expenses. I go out quite often... and many costs are associated with that. I would say that's where most of my consumption lies, from transportation or sharing meals with friends to any expense to facilitate social interactions.”*

Tables 1.3 and 1.4 categorise the places the interlocutors frequent according to varying avenues of consumption. While Table 1.3 accounts for service-based expenditures, Table 1.4 accounts for the consumption of tangible material goods. Expenditures detailed in Table 1.3 recur monthly as they either correspond to the facilitation of the interlocutors' social lives or personal upkeep, but the expenditures in Table 1.4 do not occur quite so often. The case for the latter group of expenditures is quite interesting; while most interlocutors note that they do not spend in this avenue often, the consumption practices surrounding clothing and other material

goods vary drastically from interlocutor to interlocutor. However, the interlocutors note that an exception must be made for the ongoing months leading up to the two Eids, the predominant religious holidays and a time for exponentially increased consumption across all socioeconomic classes of Bangladesh.

**Table 1.3: Interlocutors’ Service-Based Recurring Consumption**

	<b>Food</b>	<b>Commute</b>	<b>Self Care</b>
<b>Ayela (22)</b>	Street foods and corner shops	Pathao bikes	Does not go to salons and rarely buys self-care products
<b>Raiyan (26)</b>	Office lunches; food delivery services and restaurants all over the metropolitan area	Uber bikes	Gets a haircut every 4 months
<b>Mahenaz (36)</b>	Food delivery services and the occasional restaurant.	Uber, Uber bikes. Bus & plane tickets	Monthly salon appointments.
<b>Nahian (29)</b>	Groceries from grocery chains; Meena Bazaar, Agora and Unimart	Uber	Monthly salon appointments. Has not needed to buy products since her wedding
<b>Atif (28)</b>	Chef’s Table; chain restaurants e.g. Pizza Hut, Herfy and American Burger	Drives family car; sustains fuel costs	Salon; buys self-care products from Astorian or Unimart

<b>Tahmeed (23)</b>	Food delivery services and restaurants primarily in the Gulshan/Banani areas	Drives the family car and is often chauffeured, Ubers are very rare	Gets a haircut every 3 weeks
<b>Fahim (27)</b>	Eats out almost every day; primarily in Gulshan/Banani/Dhanmondi areas	Drives the family car and is often chauffeured	Gets a haircut every couple of weeks. Imports himself or is gifted products from America
<b>Rezwana (24)</b>	Restaurants primarily in the Gulshan/Banani areas	Chauffeured in family care; Uber and rickshaws	Monthly salon appointments

**Table 1.4: Interlocutors' Tangible Material Consumption**

	<b>Clothing &amp; Accessories</b>	<b>Home Goods</b>
<b>Ayela (22)</b>	Thrifths primarily. Will shop at events for unique pieces. However, buys clothes extremely rarely.	Thrifths or DIY Local fairs and events Small Businesses
<b>Raiyan (26)</b>	Thrifths mostly. Footpath vans and other holes-in-the-wall stores. Prone to impulse purchasing unique pieces at fairs and events.	Thrifths or DIY Local fairs and events Small businesses Books from Bookworm Bangladesh or Nilkhet
<b>Mahenaz (36)</b>	Sometimes does not buy over a 2 or 3-year period. When impulse strikes, buy 20-25 pieces in one go. Vans, holes in the wall in Uttara. Online stores.	Online stores Local fairs and events Small Businesses
<b>Nahian (29)</b>	Online for work clothes. Uttara vans for everyday clothes. She loves couture pieces but hasn't bought any in over a year since her wedding.	All furniture is imported. Since these are one-time purchases, they aren't budgeting for it. Household maintenance and cleaning products; same as

		groceries
<b>Atif (28)</b>	Artisan, Astorian; will buy one or two pieces every month	Aarong, Lhw, RFL
<b>Tahmeed (23)</b>	He wears surplus pieces from the garment company he works at.	n/a
<b>Fahim (27)</b>	Artisan and Astorian	n/a
<b>Rezwana (24)</b>	Usually, every couple of months; shopping complexes in the Gulshan/Banani/Dhanmondi areas	n/a

Several interlocutors state that they buy clothes every couple of months from shopping complexes like Pink City Gulshan or retail chains such as Artisan and Astorian in addition to online shops and Uttara’s infamous street vans; while the rest do not unless absolutely necessary. As previously stated, similar to the relationship between consumption and identity, the rejection of consumption can be equally definitive to one’s identity project. When asked about their consumption preferences, Ayela, Raiyan and Mahenaz readily establish individual stances on varying degrees of anti-consumerist beliefs. Both Ayela, with Poptags and Project Janky, and Mahenaz, the founder and designer of Broqué, built their businesses to confront the unsustainable nature of fast fashion. While Poptags is an online thrift store that Ayela curates for, Project Janky and Broqué are zero-waste upcycling clothing labels. With a Master’s in environmental sciences, Mahenaz claims to be very ‘anti’ consumerism and goes as far as to establish a ‘no shopping or gifts for Eid’ ban among her family, stating it is unnecessary and wasteful.

Raiyan expresses,

*“I’d like to say I am an anti-consumerist. I actively try not to buy a lot of things and advocate to others that they should try to participate in the consumption process as little*

*as possible. I think consumerism is one of the great evils of our time and is the root of many of our social problems. That being said, living in a modern urban space without consumption is difficult, so I engage in consumption.”*

Unfortunately, among affluent classes, practising anti-consumerism may often appear performative and disingenuous. While Ayela spent her teenage years thrifting for second-hand clothes that stemmed from a need to be frugal at a young age, she tells me about the early days of Poptags and the sudden trend for thrifting that erupted across Dhaka’s fashion scene in 2020. Ayela notes,

*“Working on and running Poptags, it’s made me very environmentally conscious. I try to buy as little clothing as I possibly can...but when I started Poptags, there were only 4 other thrift/vintage stores. After us, the whole market became saturated and a trend began. There was a lot of demand and the supply was very less so the pieces in my store sold out super fast and people used to fight over things. This isn’t the case anymore as there are so many stores and options to choose from.”*

Ayela had become somewhat disillusioned with Poptags when she noticed a difference in her anti-consumerist beliefs and what the Dhaka thrifting market had become, leading to her second business, Project Janky. Moreover, as already established anti-consumerist beliefs may be extended to the practices of resistance, ethical consumption and/or non-consumption (Hasson, 2018). Both Raiyan and Rezwana maintain that they are strictly following the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement by boycotting brands complacent in the genocide in Palestine.

Nevertheless, the discussion thus far has generalised the consumption preferences of several interlocutors, but a separate case must be made for Nahian as she is the only interlocutor whose consumption pattern differs from the rest. Being married, Nahian's expenditures encompass more than just her social life and individual consumption. Nahian and her husband took the initiative to move out together just 6 months ago, so maintaining a household is still very new to her. The couple strictly budgets for each monthly expenditure; including rent, groceries, hosting, employing a live-in housemaid and saving up for a car. Nahian notes that maintaining a household while working full-time is tough, thus she prioritises efficiency and ease. She says,

*“Groceries are from Agora, it's near my house and I feel like they give you very good service. I don't trust myself to go to a Kacha Bazaar, I'm not the best judge of quality and market price. I wouldn't know if they were overcharging me or not. If I were a good judge, I would have shopped from Kacha Bazaar, my groceries may have been cheaper, but I like how grocery stores have standardised pricing.”*



## **Chapter 4**

### **Matters of Representation**

Bourdieu (1984) suggests it is relatively straightforward to discern one's identity as a member of the dominant class by simply examining one's qualifications, income and a projection of their father's occupation. However, trying to understand the first half of the statement "*I am a Bengali Muslim from a middle-class family*" can be especially difficult. As established, while the existence of this Bengali identity can be traced back four millennia, a fixed measure for understanding Bengali identities has never existed. The conceptualisation of Bengali identities has always varied across different points of history. Nevertheless, this chapter of my thesis

borrowing Hall's (1990) notion of 'oneness' to examine the shared cultural codes that members of the affluent middle class hold onto to maintain their cultural identity.

In an attempt to discern cultural markers that help conceptualise their Bengali identities, I asked each of my interlocutors to share a couple of childhood memories that stood out to them. All 8 interlocutors told me stories ranging from their love for Bengali food, the sweetness of the language, and the colourful celebrations and fashions. Whilst Fahim and Raiyan conceded that they did not particularly prescribe to the notions of ethnic identity, both could not do away with their connection to Bengali cuisine, language and celebrations. Fahim says,

*"I grew up in a Bengali household. I have the eating habits of a Bengali...we have a certain practice of eating with our hands; I maintain all that. I value maintaining relationships with my family and relatives and socialising with all of them. There are certain standards I feel like I can't stray away from; I live within them in my everyday life, and as a result, I have developed a particular taste of what I do or don't like. It does affect me...I am living and exercising this part of my life, a part of me is Bengali."*

While Raiyan says,

*"I take a lot of joy in participating in the celebrations of the land; from Nabbana to Pohela Boishak and Durga Puja, I actively participate in those. The political ones, not so much, but the cultural celebrations I partake in. The other thing is that from my end, I actively try to converse in Bangla... The environment I grew up in was not conducive to the usage of Bangla but I think as I got older, I started realising that I have this longing to know and understand Bangla better."*

The significance of the conversing in Bangla remained central across all 8 interlocutors, especially those from an English medium background. Having English be the primary language of instruction from a young age in conjunction with the primarily Western media they actively consumed, these interlocutors admit to feeling a disconnect from their Bengali identity. Mahenaz says,

*“I’ve only formally studied Bangla up till my O’levels; we studied Bangla Literature; it helped me express myself, my feelings, and my thoughts in a way that I would not be able to do in English. These thoughts did not sound as poetic in English to me.*

Whilst an attendee at the Orion’s Session notes,

*“Yes, there is a proper way of speaking and pronouncing Bangla words, but a lot of us don’t or can’t speak Bangla in the best or most fluent way. So we shy away from speaking it as we are afraid that people will make fun of us like people are afraid to be made fun of for a bad English accent. But, does it make me any less of a Bengali even if my accent and pronunciation aren’t perfect? As long as I speak and read Bangla, I am Bengali.”*

All 8 interlocutors, in addition to the attendees at the participation observation session, cite the importance of conversing in Bangla, consuming Bengali media, literature, food and wearing traditional attire as definitive means to maintain a connection to their cultural identities. Despite all these avenues to consume Bengali culture, all interlocutors maintain that they are mostly drawn towards the sense of community. With dual citizenship, Tahmeed has moved back and forth between Dhaka and Toronto almost every 5 years; he observes,

*“The Bengali community is unparalleled no matter where you go...other communities (diasporas) aren’t as tightly knit as we are...We really look out for each other and I think that has something to do with how we grew up. Kids growing up outside of Bangladesh who do not speak of Bangla will still go out of their way to bond with an international student who just moved to Toronto, welcoming them into their homes and spaces.”*

Tahmeed reminisces about his childhood in Toronto when Bengali women would set up boutiques or catering companies and how his mother would go out of her way to support them, not particularly because she knew them but purely based on the fact that they were another Bengali immigrant family in Toronto. He suggests that among the Bengali diasporic communities, be it in Toronto or New York; there exists an inherent and preexisting bond solely based on shared heritage. Nahian, who moved to Malaysia to do an internship, similarly says,

*“Despite Malaysians having similar familial values to us, things were still different. I lived in a dorm and met many people from multicultural backgrounds. I’ve seen them, heard their stories, and noticed they did not have the same tight-knit family values as mine. They didn’t have what we do, the ties and pull.”*

In addition to community, family ties and values remain central in the interlocutors’ identification process. Ayela, for example, insists that her food patterns and what she likes or dislikes clearly reflect her mother, while Nahian, who hails from a joint family, vows never to move away abroad. Wanting to give her future children the same experiences she’s had, Nahian upholds the importance of family and a tight-knit community which she believes is a very South Asian tradition. Rezwana, who also grew up in a joint family, similarly says,

*“If you grow up in a joint family from a young age, it really shapes your relationships with the people closest to you and what kind of person you are...This aspect of my upbringing is kind of important to who I am... The reason I brought up my family is that things have always been on a larger scale for us than it would be for a nuclear family; things are just more intensified.”*

This desire to maintain such familial ties and community as a part of Bengali cultural identity can be understood by Hall’s (1990) notions of ‘oneness’. Within this perspective, Hall cites a desire to hold on to shared collective experiences as a mark of a shared identity. However, amongst the members of the affluent middle class, this perception of a farfetched idealised Bengali traditionalism exists. Raiyan suggests being Bengali today is based on a romanticised rural Bengali imagery, large families communally making a livelihood off of agricultural lands, while Mahenaz believes,

*“We always end up confusing what being Bengali means with the Muslim parts of our identity. Being Bengali and being Muslim is not mutually exclusive.”*

Such observations remain true as we witness many elders reminisce about this arbitrary traditionalism that existed during the days gone by. They insist that it no longer exists among the younger generation and a reference to it will be utilised in an act of chastisement. Mahenaz, despite valuing the importance of wearing a saree in a sober and presentable manner, expresses her preference for wearing sleeveless blouses; she says,

*“People nowadays might call me a “baehaiya meye” (shameless girl) for not wearing a three-quarter blouse because somehow we have gone backwards in time, where we are not progressing but digressing in ideals.”*

She suggests that Bengali culture has regressed in the hands of the affluent classes, going on to exemplify pictures of Dhaka University students in the 1970s circulating on social media. She says,

*“You’ll see pictures from the 70s, women at Dhaka University and in the streets wearing sleeveless blouses and beautiful sarees, dressed nicely without considering the possibility of ever-teasing. Now, if you are caught wearing a sleeveless blouse, so many people will just stare.”*

Rezwana makes a contrasting yet similar comment,

*“The other thing is, that the clothes that people wear have changed drastically. 20 years ago, you would be hard-pressed to find somebody without an orna (dupatta), but now people are fine with wearing crop tops outside. I feel like that is something that has changed. You can visibly notice the change in how people dress and carry themselves. You can see a change in the amount of foreign goods and media we consume. But deep down, I don’t think our attitudes have changed much.”*

## **Chapter 5**

### **Nuances at the Market**

Nevertheless, Hall (1990) detests the notion of ‘oneness’, suggesting it is all superficial. While this ‘oneness’ has aided members of the affluent middle class in maintaining their Bengali identities, it must be recognised that it does not necessarily exist anymore. Hall suggests we should look forward, stating cultural identity “belongs to the future as much as to the past”. Thus this final chapter delves into discussing the transforming structure of the local market and forms through which Bengali identities are represented in the midst of globalisation.

Khan (2013) suggests as the market transforms in the face of globalisation, so will social relationships. The ‘oneness’ in familial ties and the community that the interlocutors have reported to hold on to, no longer exists as they once did. With the imposition of the global market, pre-capitalistic relationships of trust, mutuality and moral obligations give into the contractual and profit-oriented ideals of a market economy (Khan, 2013). Such a transformation disintegrates many social relationships that once stemmed from familial and communal ties to be structurally readjusted to be commodified. Raiyan, during his discussion at the participant observation session, exemplifies the act of ‘*shebah kora*’, which is commonly associated with taking care of our elders; he insists many social relationships now can only take place through the market. He says,

*“We used to have bigger families and social systems; care was accounted for within the domestic realm. Now we can think of care as a part of the economic system, we can hire and employ nurses to take care of our elderly.”*

According to his second perspective, Hall maintains that cultural identities are fluid, always in production and should adapt as they interact with foreign influences. While collective experiences and shared history will always remain a maker of the Bengali cultural identity, we must account for the fact that the conceptualisation of what it means to be Bengali has drastically changed as the nation developed in the 21st century. While Zahin & Nion (2023) refer to Hobi Bhaba, suggesting that under any colonial rule (in the contemporary, neo-colonial rule), the colonised mimics the coloniser. This has been evident while discussing the importance of education among the interlocutors and their families; however, it must be noted that the mimicry now extends to other global influences (Western and others) deemed as the mark of modernity.



Khan (2013) similarly suggests the West is seen as ‘modern’ and replication of Western institutions and attitudes is the key strategy for societal progress.

The affluent middle class is at the forefront of this, drawing further distinctions from their counterparts. By transforming social dynamics and structure, the perception of what it means to be a modern Bengali has been co-opted and monopolised by the affluent class, and this is reflected in changing lifestyle choices and altered consumption patterns. To meet the demands of this new modified consumption pattern, producers of brands are increasingly incorporating foreign influences into their products. Several brands and small businesses have taken notice of such consumer demand and have created a line of products that fuse Bengali designs, motifs and symbols into Western fashions, home decor, stationary and more. These products primarily cater to the up-and-coming generations, for whom the lines between what is seen in media from the West and their reality in Dhaka often become blurred. Today, it is commonplace for the youth, predominantly from affluent middle-class families, to sport trendy shirts and bags with rickshaw art and ‘ঢাকা’ or ‘বাংলাদেশ’ printed across them.

The creation of such a market for curated fusion products has allowed for the commodification of culture, where the Bengali cultural experience is carefully packaged for urban affluent consumers to narrate themselves as discerning, sophisticated and modern Bengalis (Gregson & Ferdous, 2015). This hegemonic hold over the climate of the market and consumer culture encourages conspicuous consumption as a maker of status (Gregson & Ferdous, 2015). Consumption and the ability to consume more is weaponized, rejecting anyone who cannot keep up. Moreover, the affluent middle class is complicit in making it harder for their counterparts of

lower socioeconomic standing to keep up as they construct unattainable entry barriers and attach high prices to consumer goods and experiences, further entrenching social inequalities. Bourdieu (1984) suggests the market tends to favour those already a part of the dominant class. The regeneration and production of capital within successive generations allow the members of the affluent middle class to maintain their dominance in the social hierarchy.

While discerning each interlocutor's consumption preferences, I inquired if the things they consumed were made in Bangladesh. While the interlocutors recounted their consumption, in a follow-up, I questioned if consuming Bangladeshi-made goods affected how they felt represented in their identity. An overwhelming majority of the interlocutors disagreed, stating what they chose to consume had nothing to do with representation. Rezwana who had recently moved back to Bangladesh, put it simply,

*“When you're living here, you don't really think about these things. You don't have to think about everything you're doing and label them. It's just our daily life. While I was still living in Japan and wore a saree, I would say this is how I identify culturally. But here, I am not identifying as anything. That's just the norm.”*

Rezwana suggests, that while living in Dhaka there is no need to label particular instances of practice or consumption as “culturally Bengali”, stating it is just our everyday lives and routine. However, she recognises the need and understands why aspects of Bengali culture have come to be commodified in the market. She says,

*“I understand our culture is constantly changing and evolving. We don't live in the same Bangladesh that maybe our grandparents did... because we have so many external influences*

*and a lot of how we behave is different. The art that we see in media today, be it rickshaw art or how we see it on stationary now; did not exist during our grandparents' day. I think it has become a sort of tokenism but it is unstoppable...years ago it was seen on rickshaws and now it's developed as a genre of art that we perceive as Bengali; some people could argue that it's not traditional at all but I say that's just how we keep our culture alive."*

Raiyan on the other hand insists the entire market, wherein Bengaliness is commodified, is set up aiming to profit off the politics of representation. He says,

*"It is a part of the market now, sure, and I think it is a net positive activity, however, I also think of it as the gentrification of culture. The essence of our culture is milked into this industrialised complex. When I look at things at Jatra, it just looks very pathetic; it seems like a copy-paste of what we think is Bengali."*

Raiyan's sentiment is echoed within Khan's (2013) discussion of the structural changes taking place in the Bangladeshi market. He suggests commodification of culture is based on the importance placed on profit generation within the current consumer market; if a cultural commodity cannot gain significant monetary valuation, it is forgone and at risk of exclusion in favour of a product that does generate profit. Atif who insists that nothing about his everyday life is authentically Bengali, similarly says,

*"I feel like where we are going wrong is that, since original forms (in reference to the use of clay ovens and cooking utensils) are no longer useful, we have kind of forgotten all those elements altogether... they have completely done away as they are not relevant*

*anymore...To some extent, those (about clay plates and blows sold by Aarong or Jatra) have come back and been commercialised as well.”*

Of the interlocutors, Tahmeed was the only one who somewhat opposed the consensus. Having spent a portion of his childhood in Toronto, he is admittedly saddened that he did not grow up in Dhaka during the 2000s. He says,

*“After I moved back to Canada for university, the summer of 2021 was the first time I returned to Dhaka because of the Pandemic. I felt a difference in how people here talked about themselves, and they expressed themselves... Everyone has become so much more conscious about who we are and our identity. Before, we weren’t aware of it, and we never really paid attention to it. I think this development has a lot to do with seeing our culture represented in the market.”*

Despite disagreeing that their consumption preferences do not correlate with the need for representation, it is evident that the interlocutors see the utility of the commodification of Bengali culture. Tahmeed states,

*“I think these goods do a good job at representing us, a new generation, while staying true to its Bengali roots. It helps standardise and modernise what we understand to be Bengali.”*

Fahim, referring to recent events such as Dhaka Makers and Dhaka Flow Festival that aim to uphold Bengali culture with a Dhaka twist, similarly says,

*“A lot of people come together at these events, it’s a good place to socialise and meet people. By putting such crafts out onto such a market, they are bringing modernity and creativity into a pre-existing cultural identity...by shaping them into this generation’s understanding of culture...I think culture is something that changes with time and takes different forms...I feel proud to be a part of the community that is building, sustaining and transforming our culture.”*

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

To conclude I would like to quote one of my interlocutors, Ayela, who admits to owing her livelihood to globalisation and the internet. She states,

*“ I was born into the era of the internet and ever since I was 6/7, I’ve been in front of the computer... I feel like I was less exposed to Bengali culture before. When I was younger and on the internet, I only saw white people on the internet. But as I grew older, more Bengali people started creating their own things. Now, as we organise and celebrate our*

*culture on a larger scale, I feel like I have been exposed to Bengali culture more so later in life than in my childhood.”*

Conducted among 8 young professionals, aged 22 to 36, this thesis constructs a narrative as members of Dhaka’s affluent middle-class attempt to conceptualise their Bengali identity; the intersection of which becomes quite nuanced. Given that post-structuralist theory maintains that identity is now a matter of negotiation, individuals turn to consumption to represent an idealised version of themselves. However, an individual’s choices regarding what to consume or possess are not solely based on arbitrary individual preferences; life trajectories and innate dispositions in conjunction with market forces, play a significant role in determining their preferences and tastes. One’s habitus, innate dispositions, seeks to reinforce social distinctions by negotiating the distribution of economic, cultural and social capital, even during consumption.

Hailing from affluent middle-class families, these interlocutors hold expansive capital strengthened by their parents’ successes and their qualifications; however, having grown up in the neo-colonial age of the internet, how they identify themselves often becomes distorted. They maintain that conversing in Bangla, eating home-cooked meals, wearing ethnic attire and partaking in Bengali festivals do uphold their identity, however, it is community and family that they desire the most. However, it is difficult to hold on to such a means of preserving one’s identity in such a highly fragmented and individualised society. Whilst there has been a recent emergence of a market that fuses Bengali heritage with products for everyday use, some interlocutors do not necessarily believe that goods which attempt to ‘commodify Bengaliness’ represent them. Nevertheless, there is a unanimous consensus that the creation of such a market

is ultimately positive as it modernises and standardises the representation of Bangladesh and its culture on the global market.

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## **Appendix A. Questionnaire**

Participant’s Name

**Research Question 1:** How does the affluent middle class perceive and conceptualise their identity?

**Themes A:** Demography and Identification with the middle class

(Social capital, cultural capital {education, training, extracurricular activities} and economic capital {what their profession is, assets})

1.

Name	Gender	Age	Education (institution & degree)	Occupation	Address (+ rented or owned)

2.

	Father's Education	Father's Job	Mother's Education	Mother's Job	Notes on assets and property
Participant's Name					

**Theme B: Conceptualizing their Bengali Identity**

3. How would you describe yourself? (self-identification: ethnicity/religion)
4. To you, what does it mean to be Bengali?
5. How often do you feel you can express this Bengali side of yourself?
6. In your day-to-day life, how do you try to express this part of yourself?
7. What are your favourite things about being Bengali? (cultural markers/ festivals/ holidays)
8. Do you see yourself within these things?
9. As a Bengali, what are some of the festivals/ holidays you observe/celebrate?
10. What do you do during these festivals? (practices/traditions, consumptions and gift exchange with family/friends)
11. Would you say you have fond memories of these experiences?

**Research Question 2:** How are they constituting their identity through their material consumption?

**Theme A: Material Consumption Analysis**

- 12. How much of your experiences, from childhood till now, do you think have shaped who you are and what you like?
- 13. Now, as an adult, what are some of the things you do or are drawn towards as a result of the things you like from your childhood? (what activities do you do or want to do/ things you buy or want to buy)
- 14. What are the things you buy and consume daily?
- 15. What places and stores do you often visit to buy all of this?
- 16. What is the approximate amount you will towards each of these products?

Categories	Amount Allocated	Notes
Food		
Education		
Commute		
Clothing/Fashion		
Home Goods		
Luxury		
Self-care		
Recreational activities		

- 17. What are some of the activities you do with friends and family to spend quality time together?
- 18. Where are some of the other places you visit with them?

**Theme B: Constructing identity through material consumption**

19. Besides personal taste, what factors influence you to buy certain goods from certain sellers over other available alternatives and brands?
20. How many of these brands are made in Bangladesh?
21. Are there any foreign alternatives for these goods?
22. Why choose a product that is made in Bangladesh over its foreign alternatives?
23. In consuming these Bangladeshi alternatives, does it help you feel closer to your (aforementioned) identity?

**Research Question 3:** Do particular representations help them achieve certain distinctions?

**Theme A:** Changing forms of representations

24. Do these make you feel represented in your Bengali identity? Why or why not?
25. Do you think these alternatives now exist in their original intended forms, or has it changed?
26. Do you think there is anything about Bengali culture that has changed? If so, how?
27. When did you start noticing such changes? (When did it start accelerating)
28. How did it make you feel when you first started noticing such a shift?
29. Where do you think these changes are mainly coming from? (Western/other South Asian/ other global influences)

**Theme B:** Drawing distinctions as Affluent middle-class Bengali

30. What are some of the things (goods/social practices) you miss from childhood? (that you think does not exist/practised)
31. What are some new practices you are glad that have developed? (or new goods that are available that have improved our lifestyle)

32. How have these alterations/changes helped you understand yourself and the community around you?
33. Do you struggle to see yourself (represented/reflected) within these changes? How so?  
OR do you find it more accessible?
34. What do you do (practices or consumption-wise) to help you maintain your (aforementioned) Bengali identity?