

## Performing Cultural Capital: The Matrimonial Consumption Patterns in Cairo's Upper Middle Class

Mariam Al- Mokadem

Sociology, Egyptology and Anthropology, The American University in Cairo  
Cairo, Egypt

**Abstract:** In this article, I will examine the discourses and practices related to the consumption patterns associated with Cairo's upper middle class' matrimonial journey. I propose that marriage consumption patterns among this social group is informed by their habitus, a term Bourdieu describes as a socially constituted system of dispositions informed by specific thoughts, perceptions, and actions (i.e. the physical embodiment of cultural capital).

Through an ethnography, as an intern in an interior design firm in Heliopolis in Cairo, I met seven couples furnishing their conjugal spaces. My ethnographic toolkit included un-structured interviews and overt observations which allowed me to notice that matrimonial consumption patterns in Cairo's upper middle class are aesthetic moments performed to assert a position in the social structure. In other words, a bride's class location and class habitus are determined by a variety of practices situated in different domains of consumption; which symbolically draw class barriers; as the arena of matrimonial consumption is linked with standards of taste (i.e. sense of distinction). Marriage, as a social field, is viewed as an arena of showing off economic and cultural capital to affirm co-membership in a social class. Culinary choices, exchanges of gifts and conjugal space fashioning show aesthetic sensibilities as culturally ingrained habits; which allow the communication of a sense of distinction through taste.

**Keywords:** Habitus, Cultural Capital, Marriage, Consumption, Social Class

### 1 INTRODUCTION

As an ethnographer exploring the practices and discourses related to the consumption patterns of marriage in Cairo's upper middle class, engaging in chit-chats and gossipy conversations about marriage-related topics provided me with the opportunity to investigate the performativity of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1986) suggests that through the mediation of the habitus, each social group can be depicted by a set of configurations corresponding to a certain lifestyle, among a space defined by the distribution of economic and cultural capital among its members; which creates class motivated sense of distinction. In that sense, matters of taste act as lifestyle indicators, distinguishing social classes in terms of aesthetic preferences. In other words, the social spaces people navigate function as a symbolic system in which minute distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgment. Habitus, in this case, appears as class motivated set of dispositions. In that regard, matrimonial practices are important, as they incorporate a set of collective activities reflecting a power to conserve structures of perception, communication and action.

The matrimonial journey in Cairo's upper middle class involves certain events through which both families engage in to get acquainted with one another. Once a suitor is selected by the bride (as a result of romantic love or arranged marriage), the groom's family visits

the bridal family to validate the marriage betrothal; which shows that a marriage decision in this social class is a collectivistic activity; as it is considered the union of two families rather than two individuals (Sherif-Trask, 2018). This visit is significant as it is an opportunity for the fathers to negotiate a binding agreement in regard of the allocation of matrimonial milestones and transactions (Al- Mokadem, 2019). Matrimonial milestones and transactions include the engagement day, the dowry amount (paid by the groom to the bride), the wedding day and the expected matrimonial responsibilities (Al- Mokadem, 2019). The process of house furnishing is conducted by the bride and her mother. The groom provides the conjugal space with the household, its electric appliances, along with the dowry (Al- Mokadem, 2019). The bride, on the other hand, provides the conjugal relationship with furniture items, kitchen appliances, rugs and curtains (Al- Mokadem, 2019). In that sense, the nature and the function of the matrimonial journey in Cairo's upper middle class showcases that this social class upholds to collectivistic modes of existence. In fact, in collectivistic societies, parents play a major role in their children's suitor selection (Bejanyan, Marshall, & Fersensci, 2015). Accordingly, individuals will try to reconcile their personal needs with those of familial and cultural expectations. Hence, passion and commitment towards a romantic partner are socially

constructed (Bejanyan et al., 2015). In sharp contrast, within a collectivistic society, parental influence is premised on the basis of family allocentrism, defined as the strength of closeness and devotion between family members (Bejanyan et al., 2015).

In this article, the reader will embark on a journey to get acquainted with the ways in which members of Cairo's upper-middle class perform their cultural capital through matrimonial consumption patterns. This article explores the nature of this social class' habitus whereby collectivity, along with various capital considerations shape matrimonial aesthetic moments that allow members of this social group to assert a position in the social structure.

## **2. CLASS HABITUS: COSMOPOLITANISM À L'EGYPTIENNE**

The principle site of investigation (i.e. the interior design firm in Heliopolis, Cairo) gave me access to upper-middle class members. The sample consisted of seven couples aged between 23 years old to 33 years old. The subjects of the study belong to the upper-middle class, as they all live in affluent neighborhoods, travel abroad, and have completed their education in expensive private schools and universities. Their financial resources, family connections, prestigious residential areas, bilingual skills, and professional careers have all exposed them to a privileged and cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Cosmopolitanism is often associated with globalization as David Held notes; a borderless world where cultural capital flows as freely as economic capital, lifting all boats from economic underdevelopment as well as cultural backwardness" (Schwedler, 2010, p.555). Nonetheless, cosmopolitanism among this social group conveys a customized socio-economic meaning. In other words, Amin (2000), argues that the transition from a socialist economy led by Nasser to a liberal economy led by Sadat, accelerated social mobility rates; giving birth to a newly formed social class consisting of investors, business elites, managers of transnational companies, old money people and diplomats. Old money people are linked with wealth despite having experienced downward social mobility due the confiscation of their assets and properties during Nasser's era (as a result of nationalization) (Al- Mokadem, 2019). This social class continued to uphold to cosmopolitanism in terms of consumption and representational code (De Koning, 2009). In other words, despite downward social mobility, this social group, still and all, navigate leisure spaces indicating local configurations of

cosmopolitanism. Investors, business managers of transnational companies and diplomats' experiences upward social mobility at the age of Sadat, who promoted through open-door policies lavish consumption in the 1970s; which encouraged foreign imports and foreign investments in Egypt (Amin, 2000).

In today's Cairo, knowledge of foreign language has come to designate a major split within the social hierarchy (De Koning, 2009). The learning of a foreign language, the receiving of international university credentials and the consumption of transnational goods are means to affirm a social status. This shows that Cairo's upper-middle class is denoted by global connections and aspirations; as members of this social class construct themselves as transnational elites through westernized education, easy movement across transnational borders and the consumption of transnational goods and services (Al- Mokadem, 2019). Similar modes of consumptions can be spotted in Jordan's West Amman district; which experienced socio-economic changes; as the government is capitalizing heavily on the attraction of foreign capital to Jordan (Schwedler, 2010). In that sense, notions of social class are reimagined; as class membership is linked to "the more desirable dimensions of economic liberalization, that is, by providing them access to the new spaces of glittering global capital, cosmopolitanism and consumption" (Schwedler, 2010, p.555). In the same vein, the Egyptian definition of cosmopolitanism is customized by Cairo's upper-middle class requiring a sense of being world-wise, well-traveled, multilingual and fluent in the cultural codes of the world's major urban centers (Schwedler, 2010, p.555).

Members of Cairo's upper-middle class are Egyptian and modern at once. Their cosmopolitan identity is linked to consumption of goods and services, yet embracing domesticated cultural and religious faith. In other words, their gender roles are perpetuated by local cultural and religious codes. It is class scheme verifying discrepancy in standards through education, knowledge, representational code, consumption and the ability to adapt such standards with the identities determined by religious orientation and culturally saturated gender roles. In other words, family relationships are gendered (masculine) and ages (seniors) (Al- Mokadem, 2019). Identities of this social class is built on a collectivist form of existence empowering patriarchal figures to rules over women and minors (Al- Mokadem, 2019). In fact, familial supervision is an important life aspect of single

women in this social class. One example is curfew imposed on single females to show familial bonds to protect the reputation of the family in front of the neighbors (De Koning, 2009). Not to mention that marriage decisions and deals among this social group are negotiated by the fathers of the couple. A bride through her narratives demonstrated that marriage negotiations are her father's role:

*After having a few beverages and some friendly small talk, my groom's father and my dad excused themselves into another room to go over the marriage binding agreement details.*

The notion of patriarchy here concerns certain cultural constructs of structural relationships that bestow males the prerogative of ordering of the lives of those around them (Joseph, 1993). This shows that the father of the couple are considered as the main and sole representative of the family; deriving his status from the subordinate status of his wife and children, who are socially and economically dependent on him, by means of consent (Al- Mokadem, 2019). As per the gender role habitus adopted by this social class, women are believed to be more and better suited for remaining within the family; her primary place is the private sphere, caring for the home, children and husband. In that sense, the gender role habitus shapes life decisions (Al- Mokadem, 2019). This shows that the families accept and internalize the gender role habitus; which is based on the cultural notion of women remaining invested in the "home" and no matter what she achieves she needs to have a house, a husband, and children to maintain her commitment and adherence to her gender role. This is why the groom provides the conjugal relationship with the household and its electric appliances, along with the dowry to confirm power, control and authority (Al-Mokadem, 2019). This role's main purpose is to discipline and provide economic support for the family. Males who fulfil this role are considered to be power brokers in the relationship, as they make all the decisions for the family, while the bride offers the conjugal relationship with furniture, kitchen appliances, rugs and curtains to confirm her role, as a housewife in charge of the domestic sphere operations.

### 3. AESTHETIC MOMENT 1: CULINARY CHOICES AND EXCHANGE OF GIFTS

Marriage, as a social field, is considered as a milieu to "theatrically" communicate one's taste. On the day of the marriage betrothal, both families engage in conventional practices to assert taste through culinary

choices selected by the mother of the bride and gifts offered by the mother of the groom. Mothers of the couple act as social agents in charge of portraying the family's cultural capital, to communicate symbolically that their children are joining a family belonging to the same social class. Through an interview with a bride, she narrated the day the groom along with his family proposed:

*Well before the arrival of our special guests, the house was spotless and my mom had prepared a gourmet feast of seafood as well as a fancy tea and raspberry macaroons to follow. Not to mention refreshing cold pressed juices and sun-dried tomato mozzarella appetizers as amuse-bouches for starters. Anyway, on their arrival, my family and I warmly greeted my groom's family and invited them into the main salon, where the mother of the groom presented my mom an elaborate bohemian crystal bowl, filled with Swiss chocolates. 'Oh, you shouldn't have!' said my mom as she humbly accepted the lovely gift. After having a few beverages and some friendly small talk, my groom's father and my dad excused themselves into another room to go over the binding agreement details. As I sat with my mom and my groom's mother, I overheard the gentlemen laughing in the other room, which left me contented knowing that things were running smoothly. It was only 15 swift minutes until the gentleman rejoined us. My dad wore a beaming smile on his face as he entered the room and so did everyone else. 'Let's recite Al-Fatiha.' announced my dad gladly, as he put his hands together for the supplication, along with everybody else. 'Congratulations darling. I wish both of you the up most merriment and joy.' said my groom's mom as she pulled me into a tight hug, before gifting me a diamond pendant as a token of her blessing.*

In the context of marriage in Cairo's upper middle class, food and culinary choices are socially constructed commodities carrying social and cultural meanings. Class habitus denotes expected table manners; as a manifestation of one's cultural capital. As a result of cosmopolitanism associated with consumption of transnational goods and services, this social class' food preferences are associated with their social standing. In other words, this social class distinguish themselves through the consumption of transnational luxury items such as "gourmet feast of seafood, macaroons and tomatoes-mozzarella amuse bouche". These food choices act as a mean of class distinction; as it is not considered as a basic attainable food, but rather extravagant cuisine. Therefore, the mother of the bride uses food and culinary choices as cosmopolitan lifestyle indicators.



Similarly, the mother of the groom through an elaborate bohemian crystal filled with swiss chocolate and a diamond gift asserts a position in the social hierarchy. The bohemian crystal filled with swiss chocolates is a high-quality flashed glass reflects a material-cultural to indicate the family's distinct lifestyle (Al- Mokadem, 2019). Hence, this endowed value of the object communicates the groom's family high status and taste. Apropos of the diamond gift, it is deemed as a "quintessential symbol of eternal love" (Falls, 2014). The mother of the groom communicates courtesy and respect through a token of blessing; a diamond gift for the bride. Diamond, here, entails a social meaning of value as it constitutes a sensible dimension of consumption, which helps actualize social relationships (Al- Mokadem, 2019). This sheds the light of the cosmopolitan identity adopted by this social class, as their consumption shows a transnational character to distinguish themselves, symbolically, from other social classes.

#### 4. AESTHETIC MOMENT 2: THE SELECTION OF MATRIMONIAL ELEMENTS

The principle site constituted of three levels, according to what represented acceptable taste (microcosm of habitus). The first level exhibits classic style furniture, as the interior designer says that some brides are pressured to conform to their mothers' tastes, which veer towards velvety fabrics, rich silks, and overelaborate carvings. In classic interior design, much of the furniture that is selected will either comprise an antique piece or a replication. The second level showcases contemporary style of furniture, a middle ground between classic and modern styles, providing the bride with a compromise for a bride desiring to furnish her space according to modern tastes without clashing with her mother's favored classic style. The third level displays modern style furniture; which is based on emphasizing natural materials, neutral colors, and the elimination of unnecessary detailing. This style reflects practicality, a feature that is often selected by newlyweds who are not accompanied by their families.

Despite a variety of styles showcased by the interior designer, through my ethnographic journey, a common practice was detected; which is the selection and the organization of furniture items are conducted by the bride and her mother. In other words, neither the groom nor the father participated at any point in the furniture's selection phase, as it may be perceived a feminine activity based on the popular belief that it is up to women to select home items that reflect the family's social standards. It is evident in this couple's

case that men provide women with the funds (the groom provides the bride with dowry and the father provides his daughter with financial support to fulfill their duties informed by their previous binding agreement); and women use their habitus to select socially accepted items to reflect the household's social status. This is illustrated through my field notes of a bride's consultation with the interior designer:

*At the consultation with the designer, they decided on a master bedroom (with an ensuite bathroom), guest rooms, an additional bathroom, a living room, a dining room, a reception, a powder room, a foyer and a garden as a final space plan for the house.*

*A couple of days later, the mother, the designer and the bride headed together to the villa for assessment of the place. The groom's mother came along too as her approval was crucial to seal the deal.*

*The future mother in law was so sweet the whole time, showering the bride in flattery and compliments. 'I knew everything would be perfect; I wish I had a daughter as classy as you, but thank God I am blessed with a daughter in law like you.' She said, lovingly.*

This shows that the process of corresponding standards is made by the females of the families. In other words, taste is made real by the bride, indicating that the reproduction of habitus, in terms of fashioning spaces, is gendered. Mothers, in the context of matrimonial items selection, act as the main conductors of the tempo. In fact, a social stigma is usually escaped to avoid being excluded from one's community, to preserve one's status with all its privileges. Therefore, a couple's household is a symbol of their status and social class. This is why, in collectivistic societies, families from higher social classes may seek to accentuate their sons and daughters' status through furnishing their house in certain ways (Al- Mokadem, 2019). This is portrayed through my field notes of a bride's shopping along with her mother:

*After the engagement was official, it was bridal shopping time! The bride told me that she has heard a ton of horror stories about this part of the schpeel, with lots of feuds breaking out between brides and their moms over things like the color of the curtains or the brand of the bedding! However, the bride and her mom were mostly on the same page when it came to their tastes. She only forced her to do one thing. She generally does not see the appeal in buying expensive chinaware, but the mother insisted that it's a tradition that must be upheld or she'll be deliberately shamed for it by society. She didn't really care about the*



*societal pressure, but obliged anyway to keep the mojo of the moment.*

This shows that despite the fact that some forms of ownership are connected to prestige, wealth is not solely linked to status; wealth, in fact, is a key indicator of lifestyle differences, upon which status depends. Such differences rely on social activities, such as marital patterns, and residential areas, which are status symbols necessary to remain among the status group. Taste is therefore, an acquired disposition to “differentiate” and “appreciate”, to establish discrepancy of standards, to construct class distinction (Bourdieu, 1986).

For example, Chan and Goldthorpe (2006), in a study about *Social Status and Cultural Consumption*, argue that there are taste cultures with its own set of configurations as each culture is constituted of varying aesthetic values and standards that can be perceived as reactions to the varying wants and resources, tangible and symbolic, of individuals. Thus, from this view point, all taste cultures are to be perceived as being, at least potentially, of even worth and validity: that is as being equally adequate to the social contexts within which they are established and expressed.

From a Weberian sense (2013), in a study about *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, the dignity of high-status groups is manifested in their distinctive lifestyle and reflected in patterns of consumption. The status of a family, in the context of marriage in Cairo's upper middle class is fashioned by the mother. One's wealth determines one's fate and status; those who share similar forms of wealth, related to one's occupation, have access to a status group, and also share status symbols manifested in their lifestyle. In that sense, members of a status group do not necessarily share the same levels of wealth, but rather are capable of maintaining a certain way of life. These considerations may imply that a marriage will unify two individuals internalizing such standards; which are the ability to affirm a membership in a status group by demonstrating the ability to live by a specific lifestyle, inclusive of aesthetic preferences.

### **5. AESTHETIC MOMENT 3: CONJUGAL SPACE FASHIONING**

Tastes in consumption are patterned according to social class; hence, consumption habits have a symbolic function in signaling class affiliation and class difference (Salem, 2018). In the same vein, the cultural arena, no less than the financial field, is one in

which class distinction is always existent. The 'dominant classes' of contemporary societies use their high-caliber 'cultural capital', in equal measure with their superior financial capital, in order to sustain their stance of dominance. In Bourdieu's terms, a class' sense of distinction unavoidably serves as a route to constructing hierarchy. More specifically, members of superior classes are keen on displaying and upholding their high-caliber lifestyle over that of other classes by assigning to it cultural forms that they can represent as 'canonical', 'legitimate' or otherwise distinguished', while preserving an 'aesthetic distance' from other forms deemed to be inferior (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2010). Through my field notes of a bride's space fashioning, the importance of furniture items' curation as lifestyle indicators was portrayed:

*On the day of home furnishing, both parents had planted both of the family trees in the house that day. The parents had invited all their relatives, dead and alive.*

*Both families had a blast exchanging opinions and making up the apartment's design. The same couldn't be said about the interior designer and her crew though. They could barely make their way through the crowd and around the house to do their job. However, they got it done nonetheless.*

The ethnographic notes on the furnishing day of the couple show that the families' beliefs and attitudes indicate a blurring line between the self and the members of one's in-group. Within collectivistic cultures, individuals focus primarily on the needs of the group, as they are motivated by socially oriented goals, and identify the collective as responsible for outcomes (Powers, 2013). This explains the invitation of the relatives to attend the home furnishing day as privacy in collectivistic terms is defined as in-group members' involvement with other people's business. Therefore, an integral part of the setting, situation, or context to which the self is connected, fitted or assimilated is shared and inter-connected with the opinions of other in-group members. Hence, fashioning the conjugal house is a familial issue as the attendance of the relatives, on the home furnishing day, is a way to receive the approval of in-group members regarding the quality of the furniture and appliances. In basic terms, the celebration of the relatives (community members) of the conjugal household's fashion and taste grant the couple status and prestige.

In other words, the day the house is furnished, the cousins and the relatives of the bride and the groom

may be invited to approve the selected commodities. This is because admiration of home furnishing by in-group members reassures the mothers that they have selected appropriate furniture items that validate the membership of the couple in a status group and preempt the danger of any social stigma in their social class. In fact, members of this social class roam within socially homogenous social spaces, which is defined in terms of specific standards and ideals. In this sense, criticism communicated by in-group members regarding the space's fashion may serve to distinguish the couple from other members of their status group.

## 6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Class habitus dictates a cognitive way of thinking manifested in a set of dispositions allowing engagement with various modes of activities when encountering a specific situation. Cairo's upper-middle class' habitus informed by a hybrid identity associated with patterns of consumption and representational codes enabling them to traverse an urban space of perceived social hierarchies, along with an Egyptianized layer; embracing a culturally saturated gender role habitus.

Matrimonial transactions are bestowed with important meanings related to class and gender. In fact, ritualistic celebrations and home visits that accompany a new union involve a show of conspicuous consumption, where actors strive to reproduce the material behaviors marking their social class in order to secure a favorable position in the social hierarchy (Salem, 2018). Members of this social class are engaged in continuous efforts to maintain social prestige through the performance of class and gender routines to manifest discrepancy in standards, allowing the drawing of symbolic borders between social classes. Collectivistic home furnishing is another common practice constituting the journey to matrimony, in Cairo's upper middle class (Al- Mokadem, 2019). The status symbols needed to confirm a membership in a social group are the items installed to fashion the designated conjugal space, selected and organized by the mothers to avoid social stigma, perceived to stem from an economically and socially undesirable marriage. In this sense, the coherent logic of practice of this social class is derived from a common set of material conditions of existence regulating and influencing marriage decisions.

Further research is needed in order to corroborate further these findings. In other words, this article is based on the ethnography of the particular, compromising seven couples. This is why, further

large-scale surveys may be needed to allow for social engineering.

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