

India's Encounter with Consumer Culture: Role of Internet and Communication Technologies

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Abstract

Consumer culture, which is based on the principle of high consumption of material as well as symbolic goods, has emerged as a defining feature of the contemporary societies across the globe, and India is no exception to it. It symbolizes a society where social practices, cultural values and attitudes, identities and aspirations all revolve around the consumption of goods and services. However, the rise of this new culture is attributed to recent developments in technology involving the creation of a computerized network of communication, transportation and exchange. The rapid dissemination of internet and communication technologies has proliferated consumer culture helping it emerge more or less as a global culture, influencing a diversity of people, places and practices. It has introduced the population to a world of material artefacts through online shopping and access to information on latest trends in fashion and lifestyle. This trend is quite visible in India as well since the last decade of the 20th century owing to government's adoption of new economic policy promoting liberalization and globalization. According to a research conducted by ASSOCHAM (2016), India is the third largest country in terms of internet access. Due to easy online access, people have become more aware of the high-end luxury brands and their specialty. In the wake of such developments, Indians are steadily drifting towards a more open and homogeneous culture based on massive consumption of commodities and services. Under this backdrop, the present paper, based on secondary sources and observation, attempts to explore and understand the role of internet and communication technologies in accelerating the growth of the consumer culture in the urban context of India.

Introduction

The very basis of the world economy today is mass production and consumption of commodities. Thus the global business is largely shaped and carried out by a highly developed network of communication technologies. This has resulted in the formation of a society that is conditioned by mass consumption of commodities (Castells, 1996). In fact, mass consumption occupies the distinction of being the organizing principle of contemporary societies across the globe, subsequently leading to the emergence of a homogeneous world culture i.e., the consumer culture, based on the principle of high consumption of material as well as symbolic goods. Consumer culture symbolizes a society where social practices, cultural values and attitudes, identities and aspirations all revolve around the consumption of goods and services. With great technological advancement and innovation of sophisticated means of communication, the majority of people of the world today have easy access to the consumer goods.

The rapid dissemination of internet and communication technologies has proliferated consumer culture, influencing a diversity of people, places and practices. It has introduced the population to a new universe of material artefacts through online shopping and an access to information on latest trends in fashion and lifestyle (Rattle, 2014). This trend is visible in India as well since the last decade of the 20th century owing to the government's adoption of new economic policy promoting liberalization and globalization. According to a research conducted by ASSOCHAM (2016), India is the third largest country in terms of internet access. Due to easy online access, people have become aware of the high-end luxury brands and their specialty. In the wake of such developments, Indians are steadily drifting towards the consumer culture. Drawing from the secondary sources, this paper tries to explore the role of internet and communication technologies in accelerating the growth of consumer culture in India.

Understanding consumer culture

Consumer culture denotes a social setting where social practices, cultural values and attitudes are based on the principle of mass production and consumption of goods and services. According to Slater (1997), consumer culture is:

a social arrangement in which the relation between lived culture and social resources, between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources on which they depend, is mediated through markets. It marks out a system in which consumption is dominated by the consumption of commodities, and in which cultural reproduction is largely understood to be carried out through the exercise of free personal choice in the private sphere of everyday life (p. 8).

Consumer culture thus refers to a pervading atmosphere which is dominated by consumption of an entire gamut of material as well as symbolic goods. The wide range of consumer culture involves all types of consumable goods like food and nutritional products, medicines, cosmetics and ornaments, branded clothing and footwear, modern automobiles, electrical gadgets etc. (Palackal 2011).

According to Mike Featherstone (2007), the term ‘consumer culture’ emphasizes that the world of goods and their principles of structuration are created to the understanding of contemporary society. This involves a dual focus: firstly, the cultural dimension of the economy, the symbolization and the use of material goods as “communicators”, and not just utilities; and secondly on the economy of cultural goods, the market principle of supply, demand and capital accumulation, competition and monopolization which operate within the sphere of lifestyles, cultural goods and commodities. As such, consumption becomes a medium of communication where one expresses one’s feelings to others through the act of consumption (Corrigan, 1997). Consuming more and the latest goods become reflectors of the status symbol of particular segments of society. Commercial brands and luxury commodities in the market have come to serve as signifiers of identity in society (Mathur, 2014). Simultaneously, it is a source of huge profit accumulation by the capitalist class. It, therefore, represents a ‘hybrid’ culture where economy and culture intermingle together to form a new culture which is individual-oriented in nature. The modern society is thus composed of the individuals who are no longer surrounded by other human beings, but by non-living objects. As a result, there is an evolution of a society run and controlled by codes and signs, which Baudrillard termed as ‘simulation society’ (Doshi, 2003)

Modern consumption is arbitrated by market relations and takes the form of the consumption of commodities: that is to say, we generally consume goods, services and experiences which have been produced solely in order to be sold in the market to the consumers (Slater 1997). Expansion of modern markets and the availability of a large variety of commodities, backed by the rise of disposable incomes in the hands of the 'new middle class', led to a change in peoples' perception towards money, from a detestation of debt to willing acceptance of credit. The credit system, which is based on the 'buy now, pay later' logic, leads to greater purchasing power of the people (Robbins, 2005). The role of the media is also noteworthy in promoting consumerism among the people. New modes of advertising, marketing, packaging and design helped produce mass consumption and consumers, who would purchase and utilize the new world of commodities (Kellner, 2014). Media, through advertising, tries to create consumer needs for commodities with a promise of making our lives easier, simpler and happier, thus helping reproduce consumer society.

Though consumption transcends both time and space, consumer culture or the culture of consumption is quite unique and specific, owing to its global nature (Slater, 1997). Slater (1997) explains that consumer culture is the culture of modern west which is bound up with core values, practices and institutions that define western modernity like freedom of choice, individualism and market relations. Modernity, being a highly contested term, is looked at differently by different scholars (Kumar, 2008). Giddens (1990), one of most important thinkers on modernity, argues it to be a mode of social life and organization which originated in Europe in the 17th century and subsequently more or less influenced the entire world. The rise of this new culture of consumption is, however, made possible with the process of globalisation which is a logical extension of modernity (Kumar, 2008).

Globalisation denotes an unprecedented intensification and acceleration of the free flow of communication and movement of people, capital and technologies, goods, images and knowledge across the globe (Giddens 1990). A technological revolution encompassing the creation of a computerized network of communication, transportation and exchange is the presupposition of a globalised economy, along with a world capitalist

market system that is engrossing ever more areas of the world and spheres of production, exchange, and consumption into its trajectory (Kellner, 2002). Hence, the technological revolution facilitated the spread of globalisation, which has resulted in a 'global marketplace', binding producers and consumers all over the world. The 1980s heralded the subordination of production to consumption in the form of marketing, i.e., design, retailing, advertising and the product concept were ascendant, reflected in post-modern theory as the triumph of the sign and the aestheticization of everyday life (Slater 1997). All these developments simultaneously accompanied a new global culture, a "mass culture" creating sameness and homogeneity across the globe.

Consumer Culture in India: A Post-liberalization Phenomenon

In India, consumerism is quite a recent phenomenon. After independence, the notable leaders of the nation, including Jawaharlal Nehru, expressed their faith on a socialistic pattern of development, chiefly based on self-reliant and state-centric welfare (Das, 1989). However, the beginning of 1990s witnessed a radical shift in the country's economic policy from a state-centric welfare to a more open market driven economy (Guha, 2009). In 1991, the government of India adopted the new economic policy encompassing the ideology of liberalization, privatization and globalization. Under this project, some radical changes were carried on in the field of industrial policy and trade entailing free imports, less restrictions and encouragement to foreign investors, the lifting of controls on production which resulted in a considerable increase in the availability of consumer goods in the market (Palackal, 2011). Subsequently, there began a change in the consumption pattern of Indians in general. Consumption ceased to remain a mere act of appropriation of goods and services; rather, it came to be viewed as consumption of signs and symbols (Featherstone, 1991).

Along the western products there was also an infiltration of western culture based on the values of individualism and freedom of choice in the country thus leading to structural as well as ideological changes, concomitantly helping the rise of a consumer society. As such, a good number of modern shopping sites like malls and hyper markets have mushroomed in India along the line of western markets. However, the latest

revolution in consumer culture is shopping through online stores. The rising use of internet provides an impetus to online shopping and Indian consumers are increasingly adopting electronic channels to buy various goods and services. Alongside, there also grew a necessity to create consumer needs which are fulfilled by communication technologies like satellite channels and internet through advertising, marketing and promotional messages. With the advent of new millennium, technologically dazzling media has succeeded in grasping the everyday lives of the Indians, engaging them in the semiotics of consumption (Kellner, 2002).

Construction of Needs through Media Spectacle

“Hurry!!! The end of season sale is on”, “buy 2, get one free”, “Festive bonanza”, “buy now, pay later”, etc., are the messages we receive mostly today through emails and text messages in our mobile phones. This is information which is directly provided to us by sellers in such an alluring and attractive manner that we regard it as an opportunity to be grabbed early or else we lose a great deal. This leads to a tendency to consume more and more latest goods even though they do not have any utility value and this is emerging as more or less as a universal phenomenon in an era in which we live, making it difficult us to escape from. Looking through the lens of Guy Debord’s society of spectacle, Kellner (2002) argues that media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture which embody contemporary society’s basic values, serve to enculturate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution.

The concept of media spectacle describes the information and communication media that is organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities and staged events. Today, in India, there are more than a thousand satellite channels which are engaged in endorsing a high profiled lifestyle through films and daily soaps, thus seducing the Indian middle class by commodities and their comforts (Kumar, 2008). There are around 30 home shopping TV channels in India like homeshop 18, naaptol green, naaptol blue, shop cj, gemporia, etc., which keep highlighting the offers and discounts in the manner of some great events by dancing and beating the drums. The hosts on such channels

try to allure the audience cum consumers by the attractive discounts, colors and packaging of the commodities and even promises that the particular commodity is going to make our lives easier, simpler and happier.

Moreover, there are lucrative advertisements in almost all the channels, be it news channels or other entertainment channels. In a TV programme of half an hour around 10 minutes are dedicated to the advertisements. These advertisers are the hidden persuaders whose manipulative efforts are beyond the level of understanding of the innocent consumers (Packard, 1957). In the process, the media is proliferating a symbolic society by heightening the fascination with consumption and aestheticizing of everyday life (Gupta, 2000). As Marx regarded religion to be the opium of the people, in the present urban Indian social context, communication technology acts as intoxicating element - opium which has succeeded to a high degree in stupefying the India's consuming class, i.e., the middle class, distracting them from the real life situation. The government's programme under the banner "Digital India", coupled with demonetisation policy has led to a reduction in cash transaction facilitating the rise of net banking. A research report published by ASSOCHAM (2016) confirms that the number of online consumers is likely to cross 100 million by the end of 2017 and by the end of 2018, e-retail sector is expected to grow 65%.

In general, the Indians are gradually becoming more consumption oriented, thus entering the global scenario of consumer culture. Moreover, social media (like Facebook, Instagram, Whatsapp, etc.) also play a pivotal role in tempting people to have trendy and latest fashions. They serve as a platform to display their status in the society – the identity of a modern being. Subsequently, consumer culture is now equated with modernity. Media tries to convince the people that they have entered into a modern age by showcasing the western lifestyle of the celebrities. In fact, people are also convinced that they are really a modern people, without using their rationale since they consider media to be the mirror reflecting the development process of the society and imbibe the images.

Conclusion

While tracing the evidence of rising consumerism in India, the city comes out as the prime locus of consumption, especially the metros like Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata, but small and developing cities are also not left far behind in the race (Debord, 1992). This is only made possible by the diffusion of internet and other telecommunication media in the day-to-day lives of the people, usually the growing middle class, belonging to both big and small cities alike. The communication technology, through the media spectacle, is thus paving the way for the evolution of a consumer society in India. In the case of India, however, there is a vast gap between the contextual reality and the media spectacle. The image of the life as portrayed by the media is not in tune with the real life situations as we encounter many incidents around us which happen even in traditional Indian society. India has yet not overcome its social problems like unemployment, poverty, distinctions based on caste and religion, violence against women and children, and so forth. Along with informing and updating people about fads and fashion, the media should also try to seek people's attention to the ills present in our society. The critical theorists Horkheimer and Adorno have used the term "culture industry" in which they have equated media with a factory that produces a popular culture based on false psychological needs which can only be satisfied by consuming more and more material goods. They regard this to be dangerous for a society because it makes people content with the consumption for easy pleasure, making them passive subjects with dented potential and spirit of revolution (cited in Kellner, 2002). According to Marcuse (1972), another theorist belonging to Frankfurt school, 'Most of the needs to relax, have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisement, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to the category of false needs' (p, 19). Our nation is yet to achieve its goals of development in many sectors including the social sector which is, in fact, a core sector, the development of which is most essential for a nation to be called a developed, progressive and overall a modern nation. Consumer culture is thus creating a pressure on the working class of India to earn more in order to consume more. This, in turn, is creating some serious issues like health problems both physical and mental, social problems like strained relations, environmental problems etc. in the country as encountered by the west today. Before these become

rampant in India appropriate initiatives needs to be taken by the policy makers. The government may formulate a proper policy on consumer education and launch awareness programmes at both government and private offices and educational institutions educating people for living in a consumer society through teaching of skills to analyse and make value-based decision while buying a product and its impact on personal finance, natural environment and society. A quality research on the impact of rising consumerism may also help overcome the negative effects of the said phenomenon.

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