Consumerism and Mindless Consumption
Sustaining the New Age Urban Indian's Identity

Subhashini Kaul (Ms.)*
Abhishek*

A consumer culture makes it easy to accept the slow erosion of social, political and moral standards, because their passing is hardly noticed--we're all too busy shopping. – Al Gini

Consumerism as a phenomenon has most commonly been examined in terms of its collective effects, positive or negative, on an economy and its constituents. Few perspectives have incorporated the negative effects of consumerism on an individual. Managing the negative effects of consumerism in terms of identity conflicts is a key issue that has not received much attention in existing literature. This theoretical paper examines the impact of consumerism on the 'New Age' Urban Indian, who is conceptualized as an Indian adult enacting the role of a consumer; unconstrained by information availability, budget or supplier considerations for most consumption decisions. In this study, we examine the critical factors that contribute to a negative impact on consumer identity. Key factors impacting the 'New Age' Urban Indian's identity are discussed and mechanisms suggested at business firm levels to sustain and arrest this damage.

Consumerism and Individual Self

Depending on the perspective of consumerism, studies have examined its advantages and disadvantages for society as well as an individual. We briefly discuss the collective-based perspectives before examining issues at the individual level.

Collective-based perspective of Consumerism

When considered as 'equivalent to a culture of individualized self-interest' (Barnett, Cloke and Malpass 2005, p 46), consumerism has most commonly been examined in terms of the collective positive effects on an economy. These consumerism studies focus on how individual motivations collectively signal preferences and effect 'ethical' and/or 'political' changes in the marketplace.

'Ethical' consumerism examines the 'role of effective consumer demand as the medium through which the ethical preferences of consumers and the ethical records of business are signaled in the marketplace' (Barnett et al. 2005, p 45). Ethical consumerism has been examined from both the 'liberal' and the 'conservative' viewpoints (Cherrier, 2006). The liberal view suggests that consumers are active agents who exercise informed and autonomous responsibilities in relation to their values and concerns, thus showing the act of ethical consumption as a personal choice arising from individual concerns. In contrast, the conservative view maintains that consumers need to obey prescriptive and proscriptive set of ethical norms in order to consume ethically.

'Political' consumerism is defined as 'actions by people who make choices among producers and products with the goal of changing objectionable institutional or market practices' (Micheletti 2003, p 2). For example, several analysts attribute the high level of consumerism and standards of living in the United States to the absence of radical working class politics (Glickman 1993). Consumerism is an important motivating force in the movement of middle-class and upper-class women from homemaking to the work force in the twentieth century (Wells 1998).

Individual-based perspective of Consumerism

At the individual level, several studies have established the definition and expression of an individual's identity as being linked with the products consumed. Consumerism has a positive effect because it creates a venue for individuals to craft new identities and adopt values that are more relevant to them (Starr 2004).

Consumerism, even when adopting the individual perspective, for example as an individual's 'emphasis on status goods' (Leonard 2005) has most commonly been examined in terms of the collective negative effects on an economy, such as the damaging impact on the environment

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*Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, Vastrapur, 380015. E-mail: subhak@iimahd.ernet.in, abhishek@iimahd.ernet.in

(Wilk 1998, Cahill 2001) or increasing inequities in a society (Brown 2005). Few studies have examined the negative effect of consumerism on an individual's self-definition, especially in a traditional society that is transforming because of rising consumerism. Moreover, these studies usually conclude with how individuals could/should use self-restraint to resist runaway consumerism (Shehryar 2001). There is limited evaluation of what propels the erosion of the identity and what mechanisms, other than an advocacy of self-restraint, can be gainfully employed, without diluting the sovereignty of the consumer.

The following section describes the 'New Age Urban Indian' (NAUI) and the issues faced by the NAUI that we believe are indicative of an erosion of identity. We argue that an erosion of the consumer identity will lead to 'dissatisfied' individuals; which will eventually result in dissatisfied consumers. We conclude by proposing measures at firm level to arrest the erosion of the 'New Age' Urban Indian identity.

The 'New Age Urban Indian'

In traditional societies, such as India, lifestyles were largely regulated by long-standing practices. Today's postmodern trends - increasing consumerism and affluence, individualism, demographic complexity, ideological diversity, global migration, and constant innovation in communications technology - have proliferated new social identities and deconstructed social identities imposed by past (Johnston and Shoon 1998, Rumbo 2002; Benn 2003). With rising fragmentation of joint families, greater urbanization, and employment related mobility across cities; the contemporary 'New Age' Urban Indian (NAUI) is increasingly de-linked from social identity in-groups and is constantly faced with an erosion of previously established norms and values. The process has been accentuated by what is popularly called as the 'BPO culture'. This 'culture' has put 'unprecedented money power' in hands of youth who have been just out of college (Businessworld 2004). With the advent of consumerism, the NAUI's enacted role as a 'consumer' is gaining far greater importance. Material possessions especially 'status goods' are contributing to the individual's definition of the 'self' - not just the social but also the personal identity. As consumers in an increasingly free market, NAUI's can choose products to reflect the values they wish to portray. The supply side with proliferation of malls and supermarkets coupled with efficient distribution, down to the last mile, has been fueling the rise in consumerism. With greater than ever disposable income, easy access to multiple data sources, and living in a consumer dominant environment, the NAUI is largely unconstrained by information, budget or supplier considerations for most consumption decisions.

Given the ability and desire to purchase freely, the NAUI is also the recipient of a vast amount of information. We now place in perspective what we call as a dilution in informed choice making and argue for two critical reasons why this phenomenon is occurring. We conclude by arguing for arresting this phenomenon by advocating not just consumer self-restraint but by a urgent call to business firms to be more cognizant of the effects of their competitive advertising and promotions.

Dilution in 'Informed Choice' Making

According to Schor (1991), greater prosperity from a growing economy does not translate into greater free time for an individual. In fact, people are more pressed for time in decision making. A consumer can no longer spend an inordinate amount of time in information gathering before purchase. Purchases are no longer delayed. Existing literature refers to the delay in purchase as 'time binding' (Jones and Gerard 1967) either to look at alternatives or wait for better products. Time binding is reducing for the NAUI. To postpone a purchase because one is involved in comparing brands is no longer a 'rational' reason. It is simply not justifiable, to friends, family or even to oneself. There are too many products and replacements are happening faster than ever before. Earlier the phenomenon of faster replacement was limited to products where technology would soon become obsolete. Now, even consumer durables are no longer a lifetime investment.

For example, the two-wheeler market today is largely comprised of replacement buyers rather than first-time purchasers (Business Line 2002). And the average time taken from 'identification of need' to 'actual purchase' has reduced from months to weeks if not days.

Studies examining runaway consumerism have focused on impulse purchases, arguing that lower levels of cognition results in compulsive often 'mindless' consumption. This compulsive and habitual purchase has received much attention in terms of its negative effects manifesting as guilt, frustration, anxiety, loss of control and even domestic dissention (O'Guinn and Faber 1989, Rook 1987). The 'self-defining' choice among different brands and products is *assumed* to be beneficial for the individual's identity if it is based on greater cognition and pre-purchase information processing (Schiffman and Kanuk 2000). We argue that a consumer who can, and does, apply a certain extent of cognition before purchase, can yet face identity confusion rather than enhancement. The cognitive dissonance theory (Oshikawa 1969) in the study of consumer behavior, asserts that a person has certain cognitive elements, which are "knowledges" about oneself, one's environment, one's attitudes, one's opinions and one's behavior. If one cognitive element follows logically from another, they are said to be consonant to each other. They are dissonant to each other if one does not follow logically from the other.

For the NAUI, the motivation regarding cognitive information processing is not the issue. Neither is the problem related to lack of information. Growing awareness of consumer rights has resulted in little or no fine prints in most purchase terms. Online information is provided by marketers for almost all brands. Blogs of every type discuss experiences of consumers. The problem is surfeit of 'meaningless' information. The post-modern trends have changed the self-identity created in past which was the basis for decision making. However, the new self-identity has not yet been fully constructed, leading to dissonance between the cognitive elements. Thus, the NAUI is faced with increasing choice with little or no basis for selection. Two significant reasons are identified in this paper that we believe have resulted in dilution in informed choice making.

1. Reduction in Objective Parameters of Choice

There has been a significant reduction in objective parameters for brand comparisons. Pre-purchase cognitive comparisons of brands or post-purchase cognitive reassurances regarding chosen brand, are both almost impossible to achieve. Past practices, of guarantee and other confidence-building measures - which reassured consumers and reduced perceived shopping risks, are no longer relevant. Objective yardsticks for making choices are passé in most product purchase situations. In today's competitive condition, product quality differences are not a result of firm lack of capabilities but because of a firm's strategic choices. A firm 'decides' which segment of consumers to cater to. Thus, within a given segment of consumers, the perceived product quality differences are slight to non-existent (Sinha and Banerjee 2004). For a consumer, this has resulted in making meaningful choice almost impossible to achieve.

2. Increase in Non-Objective Parameters of Choice

A second reason is the reliance of consumers on non-objective information. Purchase decisions can no longer be made if 'contemplated from a removed, dispassionate perspective' (Hoch and Lowenstein 1991, p 493). Marketers, as a result of reduction in objective parameters of differentiation, have had to turn towards other avenues to create meaningful differentiation. One of the chief mischief mongers in the 'non-objective' process of differentiation is *congruity-marketing*. Congruity refers to the extent to which there is a matching of consumer self-image with brand image. Consumers high on a certain personality characteristic prefer brands that are 'high' on that image dimension (Graeff 1997). Marketers seek to advertise their brands in such a way so as to enhance perceived congruity. Greater the perceived congruity; higher are the chances of consumer persuasion (Johar and Sirgy 1991).

However, in this process, marketers have severally and jointly created effects which are 'uniquely' the same, or are perceived to be same! Not just multiple brands, but even multiple products appeal to the same critical congruity dimensions. From cars to pain balms, the relentless congruity pursuit is alarming. An average consumer today recollects advertisements with that

'warm and good feel' sans any memory of the brand or even the product type. It has become largely a question of who shouts first, louder and/or longer to claim that critical dimension of congruity in the consumer's mind.

Mindless Consumption

The above two factors have contributed significantly to 'mindless consumerism'. Blind congruity-marketing provides little differentiation and all that it achieves is a consumer dissonance with that personality dimension itself. After all, a certain personality dimension is held in high esteem *because* it is perceived as 'unique' to one's own self-image. Multiple brand-image constructions on one dimension lead to dilution of that 'value' and leave nothing in substitution except identity confusion (Johar and Sirgy 1991).

The Way Ahead

There is evidence that individuals' in the role of 'consumers' can and do make a distinction between excessive consumerism and that which is 'acceptable' (Borgmann 2000). The Indian media is adding its voice to sensitize consumers about the perils of runaway consumerism. While this effort has been more a reaction from society towards the ill-wills of consumerism, companies need to effectively address the issue. How can firms contribute to reducing the negative effects of consumerism?

We believe that consumerism needs to be treated as a marketable product. It requires an appropriate 'positioning'. Firms need to understand consumer identity sustenance. Efforts need to address value conflicts and reduce the stigma attached with adoption of new products. For example messages that convey the 'fact' that a nation's economy develops on 'consumerism' can reduce help restraint-indulgence value conflicts in conservative consumers. Patriotism is a powerful value than could overshadow almost all other personal identity constructions. We are not advocating that brands should associate themselves with a national symbol. If one brand in all product types should associate itself with a national symbol, a consumer is most likely to feel disassociated with that symbol itself! The operationalization of a "patriotic" value can be achieved through an understanding of the cultural and sub-cultural milieu. This requires different strokes for different situations, often defined and guided by local culture. Many multi-national companies have failed to establish themselves in India and have been target of protest as being seen as "cultural imperialism". However, McDonalds has been able to establish itself in India and many attribute their success to Indianization of their offering – up to 70 percent of the menu is 'Indian'. Products, which were sold in foreign countries with different combinations, have been customized for Indian palate by using Indian spices and developing India-specific products and have been often given Indian names like Maharaja Mac, McVeggie, McAloo Tikki. Consequently identity conflicts are reduced, and McDonalds, which has been seen as culture of consumerism all over the world, to be avoided by advocates of self-restraint, has a different image in India.

We believe that firms need to stop considering the Urban Indian as a consumer of their *individual* firm. Mindless application of congruity-marketing needs to cease. Instead firms need to view the NAUI as a consumer operating in the larger marketplace, taking into consideration the *entire consumption space* of the individual. The 'experiential' perspective that business firms swear by, seeking to manage the entire 'customer experience with a brand' better than competition, needs to enlarge even further. It needs to encompass and address the holistic experience of the individual's *consumption* itself. Positioning strategies need to consider *all products* and not just competing brands. An example would clarify our argument. Let us say Mrs. X indulges in impulse purchase at a store, buying a bucket because it is available at a throwaway price, bundled with several other household objects that make for an irresistible deal. Lured as she is by the carefully planned display, she reaches home and with some eventual thought finds that she is saddled with several useless products which she never wanted in the first place. No one at home is exceptionally thrilled with her purchase. Her post-purchase evaluation will invariably cause cognitive

dissonance. Either she berates herself for being too impulsive or she feels a fool for wasting money on needless objects! How satisfied is she with the store? If one examines her assessment of store product, price and service quality, probably very satisfied. How satisfied is she with herself? In economic terms, retailers may want to think about the chances that Mrs. X reduces her frequency of visits to the store especially if this experience repeats itself often and self-restraint when at the store is hard to achieve? If we take certain budget restrictions for the NAUI, then overspending on one front must mean cutting down elsewhere. Will Mrs. X be able to buy the shoes that she had planned to for her school going daughter? If not, then how will the cognitive dissonance caused by the conflict between her role as a 'household goods consumer' and her role as a 'parent consumer' get settled? The erosion in either or both identities is certain. If the supermarket where she indulged has no 'shoes', traditional marketing thought perceives no problem. Yet, we argue that marketers need to expand their vision to perceive the individual in all her consumption roles rather than restrict themselves to perceiving the relatively temporary role that an individual plays as a consumer of their product. Restricting vision to own product consumption is myopic.

An off-shoot to the afore-mentioned strategy for addressing value conflicts and reduce the stigma attached with adoption of new products would be to club consumption of products with a host of services including entertainment so that customer gets a complete experience. This, in turn allows the conservative customer to forgo the identity-conflicts and "shoppertainment – a combination of shopping and entertainment" (India Today 2005) values guide the customer. Customers start developing an identity which is a mix of consumptions and entertainment. The whole "experience" can only happen when companies join hands to broaden the offer which customer perceives as integrated and not as disjointed.

Multiple social identities are a reality. In the new millennium, every consumer has to realize her multiple role(s) and the roles' salience in an integrated manner. While business firms value her as a consumer of their product, targeting her myopically by blindly appealing to her values to increase product appeal and brand-consumer relationship embeddedness will have a detrimental effect. Managing the negative effects of consumerism in terms of identity conflicts is a key issue that has not received much attention in existing literature. Firms as well as individuals need to make suitable adjustments to ensure that while the quest for improved living conditions and fulfillment continues; the process of development helps build a new identity rather than erode individual self-concept.

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