CONSUMER CULTURE, MODERNITY AND IDENTITY

Edited by **Nita**

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Nita Mathur

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A few discussions with academic fraternity around the conspicuous presence of consumer culture and concern with 'being modern' that, in fact, stare the traditional social order in the face pressed the idea that we should do something about it. Two options were available: first was to examine the rich and the poor, the young and the old people's tryst with consumer culture and aspiration to be modern in their everyday lives extensively drawing from a cross section of societies in different parts of the world; the second was to focus on a single society and develop insights into how people use consumption and a sense of modernity to promote normative ideas about individual and collective identities. Since both alternatives seemed irresistible, I chose to first invite contributions on societies from different parts of the world and task myself to engage with the intensive study of a single society sometime later.

This book offers analysis of people's articulation of consumer culture in five countries: the United States, India, Turkey, Czech Republic and Russia. Appreciating complexities and contradictions in the course of carving out the present volume has been an arduous yet enjoyable process and to which friends and colleagues have contributed generously. At the outset, I owe gratitude to Daniel Cook, Department of Childhood Studies, Rutgers University, New Jersey, who graciously consented to circulate my call for papers through the Consumer Studies Research Network (CSRN). I am grateful to all the contributors who responded to the call as also others who acceded to my personal request to write for this collection of essays. I much appreciate the encouragement and support of my colleagues and friends at

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Introduction

The present age seems to be marked, among others, by consumer culture as an overarching and pervasive element of social life in both the mainland and the hinterland. Contemporary societies across the globe are largely marked by consumer culture that is made possible by the rise of disposable incomes in the hands of the middle classes and increasing availability of a large variety of commodities in the open market. Commercial brands and luxury commodities have come to serve as signifiers of identity in society and legitimized consumer culture that is made visible in terms of its referents: images, commodities and 'high-class' consumption as also their articulation in daily lives of people. By choice or by compulsion, people interpret and respond to it in different ways as they construct, deconstruct and reconstruct their social identities.

What makes for prolonged and rigorous interest of both laypersons and academics in consumer culture, modernity and identity is their persuasive presence in their own lives, and reflection on the contemporary social situation and societal trends. Everyday lives of majority of people across the world have come to be gripped by commodities that serve as signs in the sense of acquiring meaning from the relative and hierarchical position in the social context. The use of commodities for social competition and impressing superiority can be traced to the last quarter of the sixteenth century when Elizabeth I was engaged in outrageous display of consumption at a massive scale that pushed the nobleman to follow at close quarters. This had deep implications as McCracken (1988: 12) writes

When noblemen began to establish new patterns of consumption as a result of Elizabeth's prompting and their own status anxieties, they began to change the fundamental nature of both the Elizabethan family and the Elizabethan locality. These changes had their own profound implications for the consumption of this and later periods in England's history.

Seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the spread of competitive consumption (Goodman and Cohen, 2004).

To use the term 'consumer culture', Featherstone (2007: 82) explains,

> is to emphasize that the world of goods and their principles of structuration are created to the understanding of contemporary society. This involves a dual focus: firstly, on the cultural dimension of the economy, the symbolization and use of material goods as 'communicators' not just utilities; and secondly, on the economy of cultural goods, the market principles of supply, demand, capital accumulation, competition, and monopolization which operate within the sphere of lifestyles, cultural goods and commodities.

Consumer culture has deep roots in the Fordist mass production with emphasis on social class and later post-Fordist small-batch production with emphasis on choices of consumers. The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, attributed to the late twentieth century, marked the subordination of production to consumption facilitated by an intelligent switch to flexible specialization geared to the consumers' taste, whims and fancies. According to Slater (1997: 10), Fordist mass consumption that is often regarded as the pioneer of consumer culture gave way to

> a newer and truer consumer culture of target of niche marketing in which the forging of personal identity would be firmly and pleasurably disentangled from the worlds of both work and politics and would be carried out in world of plural, malleable, playful consumer identities, a process ruled over by the play of image, style, desire and signs.

The 'newer and truer' consumer culture is individual oriented in character and in contrast with its predecessor that was family

oriented. Slater (1997) explains that consumer culture is, in essence, the culture of the modern West. It influences everyday lives of people since it is more generally bound up with central values, practices and institutions that underlie Western modernity in terms of choice, individualism and market relations.

The inextricable connectedness between consumer culture and modernity is historically tenable, as Slater (1997) presents, through four gateways. First is the sixteenth century in which consumer goods came to occupy place of significance in social lives of people. Fashion and style emerged as significant elements of consumption that led to the rise of consumer culture. The new kinds of markets led to the development of infrastructure organization and practices to deal with them. Fashion and style came to be treated as signifiers of social status. The second is the redefinition of consumption in relation to commerce largely in the eighteenth century. This was founded on the understanding that individuals had the freedom to make and exercise choices of commodities that they wished and could afford to buy. Third is the 1920s commonly identified as the first consumerist decade but which is the fallout of the development between 1880 and 1930. This was the era of mass production of consumer goods. Fourth is the period of neo-liberalism (the world-wide beginnings of which are ascribed to the 1980s) marked by economic progress, consumer sovereignty and wide ramification of materialism in people's lives as they get uprooted from core social identities. In fact, the 'ideological miracle carried out by 1980s consumer culture was to tie this image of unhinged superficiality to the most profound, deep structural values and promises of modernity: personal freedom, economic progress, civic dynamism and political democracy' (p. 11).

This book presents an understanding of the articulation of consumer culture and modernity in everyday lives of people in a transnational framework. It is envisaged to develop this understanding by juxtaposing specific, empirical studies on consumer culture, modernity and identity with critical traditions. The 13 theoretical chapters in the book trace manifestations and trajectories of consumer culture and modernity as they connect to develop a sense of renewed identity. The urgent questions

addressed are: How do people imagine modernity and identity in consumer culture? What does modernity or 'being modern' mean to people in different societies? How does modernity contradict/coincide/develop an interface with tradition? The chapters are grouped into the following themes: lifestyle choices and the construction of modern identities; global markets, local needs: fashion and advertising; and subaltern concerns and moral subjectivities. Consumer culture is subject to specificities governed by social, cultural and economic factors. Given the wide variation in consumption patterns across the globe, it is nearly impossible to do justice to all the variants of consumer culture in a single volume. It is pertinent, however, to present select cases not overlooking the common features sweeping across societies. The chapters in this book deal with five distinct locales of consumer culture.

The first is the United States representing large-scale economies and high-end consumption societies. The roots of consumer culture in American society are deep. The period following end of World War II marked an increase in the rate of consumption in America that got checked to some extent in late 2007 when the economic recession set in. Ritzer (2010: 31) writes,

> On a per capita basis, Americans were apt to consume more of virtually everything than people in most, if not all, other nations of the world ... In the realm of services, Americans became the world leaders in the consumption of medical, psychiatric, legal, and accounting services. It is not just that they consumed more of everything, but more varieties of most things were available to, and used by, American consumers than those of most other nations.

Consumer culture seems to have trapped both the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless, and the well known and the lesser known.

The second is India providing fertile ground for study of consumer culture for the reason that consumption sets the benchmarks for middle classes' assessment of their position in society. Those with financial constraints feel pushed to engage with conspicuous consumption.

The economic reforms of the 1990s that opened the gates to the world market registered a fairly prolonged period of economic growth. The social consequence was the emergence of new lifestyles that fed urges of large section of people, particularly the middle classes, for exercising individual choice and engaging with leisure and pleasure of consumption generating a sense of confidence and feeling good (Brosius, 2010). Concomitantly, slogans such as 'India Shining' and 'Modern India' have come to represent it all both at the domestic level (providing confidence to the people at large) and international level (providing confidence to overseas investors).[1] What adds importance to the India case is the contradiction in the reception to economic reforms by the people. According to Ganguly-Scrase and Scrase (2011), economic liberalization is not an accepted dogma; its processes have evoked much dissatisfaction among the people belonging to different sections of society. For most, aspirations are not matched by the material gain. This may be appreciated in juxtaposition with their overall assessment that the consumer revolution in India is pushing a wide range of products (both locally produced, and imported) in the market space to feed the savings of 'consumer junkies'.

The third is Turkey, for the reason that it is negotiating for membership in the European Union and more importantly because it represents geopolitical connect between the west and the east. The resurgence of Turkey from the economic crisis of 2001 (in the course of which Turkish Lira depreciated and financial burden on the government increased due to sudden rise in the rate of government's debt instruments) has influenced modernity and consumer culture tremendously. With GDP per capita of US$10,000 (in 2012) implying proportionately large disposable income in the hands of the people it is an emerging free-market economy driven by its industry and service sectors. The World Bank classifies Turkey as an upper middle-income country. Predictably, it is an important destination for marketers. According to Yalcinkaya (2009), consumerism is most robust in the areas of retailing trends, use of credit or credit cards and consumption of imported goods. Unfortunately, the Gini coefficient

of the country is 0.43 confirming wide inequality in income and wealth.

The fourth is Czech Republic because it has undergone several social twirls and twists in transition from centrally planned economy to market economy since the late 1980s; and remnants of communism that rested on moralistic distinction between 'necessities' and 'luxuries'[2] that continue to influence people's agency in consumer society. The Czech Republic is a special case in presenting the practice of consumer culture by the elderly. The present-day Czech elderly are cautious consumers. Contemporary consumer society holds out disorienting experience for many elderly people in the post-revolutionary Czech Republic. They have been witness to the transition from controlled economy to market economy and had had limited personal experience of life under communism but are now confronted with ubiquity of choice and the need to take full responsibility of their choices. This is extremely difficult for them given the fact that they were used to and appreciative of the availability of limited choice. Also, they suffer from a sense of loss as main providers in the family and seek to compensate it by buying commodities for the children which creates tension between the two generations.

The fifth is Russia and what makes it special for developing an understanding of consumer culture, modernity and identity is the transition from a conservative and centrally planned to consumer-driven economy. Soviet period witnessed production of goods with provision of repair. Notions of luxury and fashion, penchant for material things met with resistance as they are treated antithetical to spirituality. The end of communist regime in Russia and onset of massive inflation, coexistence of abject poverty with abundance and excessive wealth, and conspicuous replacement of Soviet ideology with sheer money-making enterprises and big man politics that came along with has brought about significant transformation in patterns of consumption, particularly in cities. The lifting of rationing and the incoming of foreign goods have encouraged the rich to express style in terms of acquiring greater number of a limited range of status goods rather than diversifying their choices to include a large variety

of goods in their carts (Humphyery, 2002; Oushakine, 2000). Shevchenko (2002: 166) adds,

> The opposition between past and present strengthens consumers' attachment to the older objects of their household possessions but, at the same time, encourages them to acquire more. Representing the different life stages of their owners, these two classes of objects serve as the means through which both the socialist past and the (arguably) capitalist present are endowed with value and meaning.

Lifestyle Choices and the Construction of Modern Identities

Several studies have established that consumption of consumer goods and services addresses our identity directly in dual sense of estimating our own and others' position in society. Giddens (1991) succinctly suggests that the notion of lifestyle becomes exceedingly important in modern social life. As tradition weakens and the interplay between local and global becomes prominent, individuals are confronted with large-scale lifestyle choices that they are virtually forced to negotiate with. He adds that despite the standardizing influences such as commodification, the openness of social life, availability of diverse contexts of action and 'authorities' necessitates consideration of lifestyle choices as a significant constituent of self-identity. The emphasis on lifestyle choices influences even seemingly inconsequential decisions taken on an everyday basis such as what a person would wear, eat, do in leisure time, how s(he) would conduct herself/himself at workplace, etc. These are largely decisions regarding not simply how to act but who to be. The construction of identity and of a particular lifestyle is influenced by socio-economic conditions, group pressures and role models (Levy, 1959; McCracken, 1988). Self-identity is a reflexive enterprise, which is factored by an individual's selection of self-image or how/what s(he) chooses to project about herself/himself.

Shift in focus from production to consumption re-fashioned people's identities as they found themselves liberated from

restrictive, sometimes oppressive constructs of identity and vested with the freedom to consume, make consumer choices and present their renewed identities. Commodities are connected with society not only in terms of their 'use-value' but also, and perhaps more importantly in the modern age, by their appropriation and usurpation in people's lifestyles. The consumption of commodities is, in effect, the consumption of signs for which reason commodities are defined not as much by their use value as by what they signify. Ritzer (1998: 7) clarifies, 'And what they signify is defined not by what they do, but by their relationship to the entire system of commodities and signs'.

More than maximizing satisfaction out of the utility intrinsic to a commodity itself that would in the long run set limit to nature and extent of consumption, consumers tend to consume a diverse variety of commodities and for several reasons. Another feature not emphasized often is the freedom to choose from a wide variety of commodities thereby out ruling the possibility of corner solutions. In fact, the insatiability of the present-day consumers is enhanced by the larger variety of commodities and by the paradoxical promise of consumer culture that either a commodity will satisfy the consumer or there is always another one waiting to be picked up. In a broad framework, consumers are sovereign, as Slater (1997) puts it, in at least two senses. The first is sovereignty of consumers in identifying and formulating their own desires, wants and identities constituting the domain of the private sphere which is free from the influence and interference of external agencies. The second is sovereignty in terms of enforcing the producers to respond to consumers' preferences and demands. According to Appadurai (1986: 32), demand of modern consumers for commodities is critically regulated by 'high-turnover criteria of "appropriateness" (fashion), in contrast with the less frequent shifts in more directly regulated sumptuary or customary systems. In both cases, however, demand is a socially generated and regulated impulse, not an artifact of individual whims or needs'. That demand is socially and not individually generated and regulated is what makes production and distribution of commodities a feasible enterprise. This does not,

however, foreclose the need for product and price differentiation within a community and across communities.

Mike Featherstone (in this volume) focuses on the group of extremely rich people with enviable acumen of exploiting opportunities arising out of financial and social deregulation to their advantage that has emerged in different parts of the world. He critically analyzes their consumption spectacles and luxury lifestyles. The glamorized niche that the super-rich have created for themselves is highlighted by the media in a way that it captures public imagination more so because they are projected as highly successful people who live off their exemplary hard work and initiative. What makes a spectacle of the super-rich is not just their sprawling residences, fancy cars, private jets and yachts and overall luxurious lifestyle, but also their indifference to national interests such as contribution to taxation even in times of economic crises. Embroiled in the paper are the twin issues of power and national and social responsibility of such people.

In India, the meaning of modernity is produced through social, economic and cultural contexts and that it is generated out of different ways in which tradition and modernity get juxtaposed with each other. A person's ideas about what it is to be modern and what modernity *per se* is largely obtains from the process of socialization, personal experiences and interaction with the peer group. Modernity presents new ways of casting and interpreting tradition. Interestingly modernity creates globalized hybridities that are sensitive to both local value system(s) and nostalgia for traditional ways of being and people's craving for 'good and modern life' which it promises.

Sanjay Srivastava (in this volume) brings together two allegedly separate domains: the modern commercial market represented by the malls and construction of the self as he locates shopping in its social logics and dynamics. He demonstrates how people transpose practices, passions, aspirations and relationships from private settings to the mall bringing out their agency in expanding the scope of the mall from a commercial centre to a site for meaningful social interaction. Drawing on qualitative research in two malls located in Santiago and Chile, Stillerman and Salcedo (2012: 2) contend, 'Consumers have a reflexive

relationship to malls: they are skilful, mindful, and self-critical shoppers, in contrast to the "seduced consumers" described by others.' Srivastava describes how shopping malls negotiate with the urban imagination to re-fashion the self. This provides a kind of strait between shopping malls, international chains of restaurants, print and electronic media, art and performances facilitated by spatial mobility and electronic communication on a global scale and impresses critical transformation in everyday, ordinary lives of people.

Shelly Pandey (in this volume) discusses the nature extent of urban women's engagement with consumer culture. She focuses on newly empowered young women working in the BPO sector. The situation is a complex one in that it is fraught with tension between two rival ideologies governed largely by tradition (within which they have grown up and remained committed to) and consumer culture (which attracts, pulls and lures them). At the outset, these women assert their sense of empowerment by adopting 'Western wear' (largely jeans/trousers and t-shirts and skirts), buying all that they ever had a fancy for, and having a say in matters (including those related to budgetary allocations) in their own marriage that was earlier ruled out completely. She concludes with the note that seeming social and financial empowerment has not, however, liberated women from the shackles of patriarchy.

The nostalgia of people for images and experience of tradition-bound ways of life (such as rural art dwelling space and cuisine) is commodified and presented in fabricated enclaves within the city that come for premium. Nita Mathur illustrates this (in the present volume) with examples (from India) of the Chowki Dhani village which is representative of the countryside in the state of Rajasthan, and Pind Balluchi which is a chain of restaurants known for serving 'authentic' cuisine from the state of Punjab in a village setting. Both, Chowki Dhani village and Pind Balluchi, draw on the fond memories and reminiscences of older people and familiarize the youth what 'goodies' the village had to offer. In the Indian situation, the subculture of modernity is not at crossroads with tradition, rather it branches out from tradition itself and in doing so retains certain aspects. Basi (2009)