Marketing in Postmodern India: Bulgari Meets Bollywood

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INTRODUCTION

Despite an abundance of literature considering the impact of postmodernism on aspects of Indian culture and society, the implications of postmodernism within an Indian marketing context has received little, or no, attention from academics and practitioners alike. This is surprising in light of the impact of globalisation on consumer attitudes and behaviour in a fast changing Indian society. Social, economic, cultural and technological dynamics are redefining what Indian consumers think, feel and do. These changes are seen as being of such significance that they have led to researchers declaring, "a postmodern social system is gradually, if not rapidly, coming to India" (Chaudhuri and Majumdar 2006 p.12). Therefore it seems valid to suggest that there is an urgent need for providing a critique of postmodernism from an Indian perspective. In order to do so however, it is necessary to consider postmodernism not as it is seen in the West, but as seen in the Developing World. This paper proposes a postmodern framework for understanding the development of successful marketing strategies in contemporary India.

CONTEXTUALISING THE POSTMODERN

The definition and evolution of postmodernism has been widely discussed and debated within the literature. As Baumann (1992 p.vii) suggests, "postmodernity means very different things to many different people". Postmodernism is essentially a western philosophy, which "refers to a break in thinking away from the modern, functional and rational" (Williams 2006 p.484). This school of thought has been described as "the invasion of the subconscious" (Berthon and Katsikeas 1998 p.154). Consumption and marketing, as it is perceived in postmodern societies, is relatively new (Firat 1991). The importance of self and social images has given rise to the phenomenon where products express symbolic meanings (Cova 1996). In such a society, "Objects no longer serve as accurate representations of consumer practices; rather, they allow a wide variety of consumption styles" (Holt 1998 p.5). In order to examine the extent to which postmodern conditions are relevant in Indian society and to discuss their implications for contemporary marketing strategies, this paper will use a framework developed by Firat and Venkatesh (1993). Firat and Venkatesh identified the following five conditions of postmodern culture: i) hyperreality ii) fragmentation iii) reversal of consumption and production iv) decentralizing of the subject v) paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites). We will use these conditions to further explore postmodern Indian consumption.

HYPERREALITY

Hyperreality refers to "the blurring of distinction between the real and the unreal, in which the prefix 'hyper' signifies more real than real. When the real i.e. the environment, is no longer a given, but is reproduced by a simulated environment, it does not become unreal, but realer than real" (Atwal and Williams 2007 p.30). This is arguably the most dominant postmodern condition in contemporary India and is exemplified by the media and entertainment industry. Bollywood, which can be loosely compared to the so-called 'Disneyfication' of reality, characterises the core essence of hyperreality. Bollywood captures not only the imagination in the form of song, music and dance but fairy tale settings, romantic melodrama and heroic storylines immerses the viewer in 'simulated reality'.

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A film theme park similar to Hollywood studio parks is scheduled to open in Mumbai. Bollywood cafes, a hall of fame, museums, rides, film sets, gaming booths and simulator experiences will unlock a more than real Bollywood experience. Likewise, popular soap operas and reality TV shows such as Kyunki Saas Bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi and Big Boss are outlets that allow viewers to escape from realism and engage in hyperreal settings. This phenomenon has wide ranging implications, as reported by Berthon and Katsikeas (1998 p.151), "Hyperreality engenders a general loss of the sense of authenticity – i.e. what is genuine or real". Indeed, postmodern literature has identified the cultural significance of shopping malls, "appropriated for forms of social interaction whose logic and experiential consequences are by no means a mere effort of retailing institutions" (Miller 1997 p.40). This development is, however, not exclusive to western societies. The shopping mall boom in India is redefining the shopping experience. Shopping malls such as Crossroads in Mumbai or The Forum in Bangalore are conceptionalised towards "shoppertainment".A one-stop shopping experience encompassing designer boutiques, department stores, restaurants, cafés, fashion shows, cinemas and bowling alleys are designed to create an enjoyable and memorable experience. Postmodern consumers consume imagery and do not focus on what the images represent. As Miller and Real (1998 p.30) argue "we live in a world where the image or signifier of an event has replaced direct experience and knowledge of its referent or signified".

FRAGMENTATION

Postmodern culture and society exhibits the fragmentation of markets, media and experiences. Market fragmentation is characterised by the emergence of smaller segments and the by-product of target marketing. This is evident within the fashion sector in which branding campaigns are targeting specific lifestyle segments. The launch of the Indian edition of Vogue allows advertisers to target a designer and upmarket fashion conscious segment. Media fragmentation is demonstrated "both by the proliferation of media vehicles and by the dissolution of programming materials into short, momentary images and sounds typified by MTV" (Patterson 1998 pp.69-70). The media revolution is shaping a new cultural movement in India. Consumers in urban India have the choice of literally hundreds of TV channels via cable. A review of television content in India confirms the blurring of fact and fiction, realism and fantasy, authenticity and synthetic. News, entertainment, lifestyle, sport and celebrity gossip are merged increasingly into one. Observers in western societies reinforce this phenomenon- "Advertisements, infomercials, programmes, and music videos, all of which increasingly resemble each other and rarely connect to a central, unified theme or focus" (Proctor and Kitchen 2002 p.148). Fragmentation of experiences "result in 'bricolage' markets, that is consumers who do not present a united, centred self and, therefore, set of preferences, but instead a jigsaw collage of multiple representations of selves and preferences even when approaching the same product category" (Firat and Schultz 1997 p.191). For example, western-influenced lifestyles are often adopted in work and leisure settings whereas traditional Indian customs and values are dominant in the home. Likewise, postmodern consumers are searching a multiple set of preferences and experiences. Luxury hotels such as The Taj Mahal Palace and Tower in Mumbai operate as so-called "cathedrals of consumption" (Ritzer 1999). Consumption opportunities range from shopping at designer boutiques to dining in speciality restaurants whether Japanese, Chinese, Indian or Nouvelle Cuisine.

JUXTAPOSITION OF OPPOSITES

This condition has been described by Patterson (1998 p.69) as "opposing ideas, styles and conditions are brought together and blended together and blended to create something new and fresh". This is typified in many facets of Indian culture and society in which modern values interplay with traditional values. Indo-western clothing styles such as Western Salwars or the combination of jeans and traditional tunic tops are a visual feature of young urban Indian fashion. Hindi music played on TV music channels has often been remixed to give a western feel. A McDonalds fast-food restaurant in Bangalore, Delhi or Mumbai will offer a similar brand experience as in London or New York but menus are tailored to the

demands of the Indian market. McAloo Tikki, Chicken Marahaja Mac, Paneer Salsa Wrap, Chicken McCurry Pan are a selection of snacks specific to the Indian market. Underpinning this condition is the notion of "Indianness" which has been used to describe contemporary culture in many areas including fashion, music, cuisine, art, architecture, design and advertising communications. This reflects the ability to construct an identity that amalgamates Western influences with locally rooted values. Shivkumar (2007 p.38) argues that the Indian cultural imprint "results in a constant churn and intersection of traditional and modern to create new blends, amalgams and trends that are uniquely Indian".

DECENTRED SUBJECTS

"Decentred subjects are the reverse of centredness where individuals are unambiguously defined by their occupation, social class, demographics, etc" (Proctor and Kitchen 2002 p.149). Socio-economic factors continue to play an important role in defining target segments in India. The National Council of Applied Economic Research defines the Indian middle class comprising of 'Seekers' and 'Strivers' with real annual household disposable incomes of 200,000 to 500,000 and 500,000 to 1,000,000 Indian rupees respectively. However, changing consumer profiles are challenging traditional segmentation criteria and thereby marketing strategies. Anecdotal evidence would suggest a changing social and fabric structure of urban Indian society. For example, the increasingly complex and unpredictable consumption of luxury has resulted into a coalition of consumers who possess a diverse range of demographic and psychographic characteristics. This is supported by Khan's (2006 p.46) depiction of the Indian affluent masses, "They come in varied shapes, sizes and style quotients. Garment exporters, multinational bankers, college kids earning plum salaries at call centres or BPO (business process outsourcing) operations, well-heeled corporate wives, and successful entrepreneurs". The emergence of a broader middle class has important implications for the marketing of luxury goods. A study conducted by Technopak (2006) found the Indian luxury market has a market potential of approximately $14.4 billion. According to Khan (2006 p.46), "Today, given the rise in purchasing power, luxury consumption is no longer reserved for the few. This is a time in history when the affluent masses are no longer at a financial distance from luxury".

REVERSAL OF CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

"The postmodern individual has involved into Homo consumericus, a creature defined by consumption and the experiences derived there from" (Firat and Schultz 1997 p.193). Within the broad context of marketing, it is generally acknowledged that consumption has become a defining feature of postmodern societies (Holt 2002). Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006) consider the development of consumer culture in India according to three distinct phases. First, the pre-independence period characterised by the Gandhian philosophy of simple living. Second, the post-independence typified by socialist ideology. Third, economic liberalisation during the 1990s lead to the development of contemporary consumption culture. There is strong evidence to suggest that consumerism is playing an increasingly dominant role in contemporary Indian society. A study conducted by the McKinsey Global Institute (2007) points to a significant growth in consumer spending in the next two decades. The report predicts that given a real compound annual growth of 7.3 percent, aggregate consumption in India will grow in real terms from 17 trillion Indian rupees to 70 trillion ($1.5 trillion) by 2025 to become the world's fifth-largest consumer market. The significance of consumption is characterised by the growth of advertising expenditures. Zenithoptimedia (2007) reported that advertising spending in India increased from $1.1 billion in 1996 to $4.7 billion in 2006. It is forecasted that advertising spending will exceed $7 billion in 2009. Likewise, the growth of the luxury industry is a compelling feature of a consumer society. Louis Vuitton, Cartier, Fendi, Bulgari, Piaget, Tiffany, Moschino and Chanel are just a selection of luxury brands that have recently entered the Indian market. In May 2007, Ermenegildo Zegna launched a 3,000 square-foot flagship store in Mumbai. Emporio, a luxury-goods mall, is set to open in Delhi in order to cater for rising consumer demand. Indeed, the desire for international brands is driving consumption abroad. According to Visit London (2007), Indian visitors to London spent more than Japanese tourists.

Postmodern consumption is thus used to define and express identities within society. Consumers seek self-images and the acquisition of international brands allows Indian consumers to convey signs and images to the outside world. Recent evidence lends support to the growing significance of material lifestyles and conspicuous consumption. Khan (2006 p.46) observes that affluent consumers "want the world to know just how quickly and how far they've climbed the social mobility ladder". AC Nielsen (2006) reported that 68 percent of Indian respondents agree to the statement, "People who wear designer brands want to project social status". As Atwal and Willams (2007 p.30) argue, "Consumption plays a part in expressing and creating individual abilities, developing creativity, finding fulfilment and developing a sense of belonging".

IMPLICATIONS

In a new age, marketers need to make a shift away from a features-and-benefits approach, as advocated by the traditional school of marketing. As Tsai (2005 p.432) argues, "The traditional product/service value proposition is no longer adequate for reaching consumers or creating significant differentiation. Businesses must facilitate the enhancement of a seamless total experience for consumers, which determines whether products or services maintain competitive edges". Experiential marketing views consumers as emotional beings in which brands engage with consumers through deep, meaningful and tangible experiences. Williams (2006) highlights the differences between traditional and experiential marketing. Firstly, the focus is on customer experiences and lifestyles, which provide sensory, emotional, cognitive and relational values to the consumer. Secondly, there is a focus on creating synergies between meaning, perception, consumption and brand loyalty. Thirdly, it is argued that customers are not rational decision-makers, but rather driven by rationality and emotion. Finally, experiential marketing requires a more diverse range of research methods in order to understand consumers. New approaches need to be therefore considered in order to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the new generation of consumers. The characteristics of the postmodern consumer demand "an experienced-based marketing that emphasises interactivity, connectivity and creativity" (Cova 1996 p.20). Pine and Gilmore (1998) suggest that experiences can be plotted across two bi-polar constructs - customer participation (ranging from active to passive) and connection (ranging from absorption to immersion). From their two bi-polar, experiences can be categorised into four "Realms"; namely entertainment, education, escapist and aesthetic. The richness of an experience is a function of the degree to which all four realms are incorporated. Within the tourism marketing sector, experiential marketing can be seen in for example the campaigns which seek to engage second and third generation Indians, living outside India, to rediscover their roots. This has been done through bringing communities together for a key experience, in this case the Pravasi Bharatiya Divas festival. The transition to an 'experience economy' has been acknowledged within the western literature. Starbucks have elevated the consumption of a routine commodity, coffee, to a memorable experience. This 'new' movement has already begun in urban India, and the early entrants are the pioneers of Western marketing. For example, Coca-Cola introduced its experiential lounges in the summer of 2007. Coke's Red Lounges are open air youth corners with comfortable couches, iPod stations and gaming options. Other companies are also beginning to take note of the value of experiential marketing, albeit in a very limited manner.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the origins of postmodernism are embedded in western culture, contemporary Indian society is embracing postmodernism. An Indian postmodern society is fast-changing, dynamic, unpredictable and chaotic. However, recent socio-economic developments have significantly changed consumption processes. Marketing within India remains modernist in nature, utilising models associated with traditional marketing concepts. Given the changes so evident in contemporary Indian society this is unlikely to be successful into the future. According to Schmitt (1999 p.55), "traditional marketing was

developed in response to the industrial age, not the information, branding and communications revolution we are facing today". Marketing strategies need to be increasingly developed through a postmodern orientation. Contemporary consumption in India can be interpreted in terms of pleasure, fantasy and style (Mazzarella 2003). Those who market experientially will achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. As Tsai (2005 p.433) argues "Marketers are faced with the challenge of finding ways in which consumer commitment is commensurate with the enhancement of unique and enjoyable experiences". Innovative experience design will need to become a key component of postmodern marketing in contemporary India.Research was made possible by a grant from the ESC Rennes Management Research Fund.

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