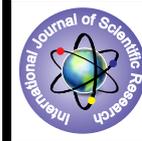


The Effect of Global Brands on The Culture of the Indian Urban Consumer



Management

KEYWORDS : Global Brands, Urban India, Culture, Consumer behaviour

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ABSTRACT

The last twenty years has seen a plethora of global brands making a foray into India. India's burgeoning population has caught the eye of all global brands. India's urban class has witnessed the biggest revolution. With the presence of global brands, the urban Indian has for the first time got choices. Electronic media and technology has exposed the consumer to the western lifestyle. The global advertisements have made the consumer indulgent. The easy accessibility of brands, the affordability and promotions has brought about change in the purchasing and consuming patterns of the urban India. The traditional old Indian has undergone a metamorphosis. From being a simple, tight fisted, family oriented, society fearing, risk adverse person, he is showing new colours of indulgence, materialism, individualism and confidence. It is important to understand the changes that have resulted because of the presence of these brands on the urban consumer's culture. Has exposure to global brands changes some rituals, beliefs, customs, traditions, food habits? An attempt has been made to understand the cultural changes in urban India due to the presence of global brands.

Introduction

A global brand in simple words means a brand name of a particular product which is recognized through out the world. It is perceived to reflect the same set of values around the world. For a brand to be global, apart from its worldwide presence, it deploys the same ideas and values globally. Global brands typically strategize at a global level and execute locally. In an attempt to form a relationship with the customer, brands conduct voluminous research to understand the consumer and adapt the marketing mix locally. More than 100 brands have forayed into India. Typically global brands enter the market with the strategic focus to capture it by giving it their best resources. Colossal amount of money is spent on promotion and brand launches.

With South East Asia becoming an important region, global brands have flooded these markets and the consumers have responded positively by accepting them and making it a part of their consideration set. India became the second fastest growing major economy in the world, next only to China. Liberalization brought in the era of globalization in India. The most prevailing significant trend witnessed in India, in the past fifteen years. With it came global brands. The phenomenon of being present in multiple countries was not unique. For example, Coca-cola had presence in 120 countries in 1950's, McDonald in 58 countries by 1991 and Reebok, 170 countries in the early 1980s to name a few. The facilitation in the acceptance of global brands in India has been due to numerous reasons – emergence and quick adaptation of technology across India, liberalization of trade, change in the political ideologies and penetration of television.

The Global brand and the Indian Consumer

The presence of more than 100 global brands in India, cultural norms seem to be going through some changes. According to ASSOCHAM, The fashion, food, fast moving consumer group, media, advertising and entertainment industry is witnessing unprecedented growth in India. The advertising agencies have played an important role in the cultural creation of the new urban middle class. Advertisements exert tremendous power on the people to educate and inform; to shape the values, attitudes, and lifestyles of generations to grow up with it. It has become an aspect of our society and our life (Panigrihi and Chandra, 2010). Global brands adapt to the local markets but their brand image, positioning and DNA remains the same across the world. These global brands change the language, have Indian models, create an Indian look and feel to the advertisement but the positioning is still global. For example, Olay, a global brand from the house of Procter & Gamble advertises its Age-defying crème in India using celebrity endorsement by the leading actress Kajol. Everything about the advertisement gives the feel of a progressive urban Indian but its positioning is the same as its global counterparts. India has been a country of traditions, values and customs. In India, age defines the person's role in the society.

As soon as the son gets married and have children, the parents take a back stage. They focus their energies towards religion, God and spending time with grand children. They stop taking an active part in social functions. The need to look young was never felt. With these age-defying crème, mother-in-laws want to look young. These elderly ladies have not taken on to religious activities in a big way. The traditional lady of the house was always focussed on looking after the family members. Her focus was her family and house. She did not indulge on her desires. The market for anti-ageing products market is worth some Rs 1,200-1,400 crore Sharma(2012), but the growth has been encouraging. Olay's launch in 2007 was accompanied by a high-voltage advertising campaign, that talked about the seven signs of ageing and currently has 40% of the market share. Not only did Olay become a market leader but it also increased the pie of the market. According to a consumer survey done by Kuick Research, titled 'India Male Cosmetics Market-Consumer Insights 2012', many men are now using anti-ageing products, though these are meant for women (Sharma,2012) This indicates a major shift in the urban women's mindset – a traditional, self sacrificing woman to a modern woman who indulges in personal desires.

Liberalization also allowed gave economic independence to the Indians. Consumption – condemned as futile by the religious texts, strenuously resisted by grandparents, who denied its pleasures to their children, who taught their children to resist in turn had become a new religion for millions. The ever increasing moneyed class loves to shop (Giridharodar, 2011, Pg. 139). Affluence is bringing to India a slow-privatization of attitudes(Giridharodar, 2011, Pg. 162).

Research Design

Objective of the study

The primary objective of the study is to examine the effect of global brands on the culture of the Indian urban consumer. The study would seek to address the following question. The effect of global brands on the urban Indian consumer's culture, with a special focus on the various elements of culture and values.

Methodology

The methodology comprised of focus group discussions of consumers in the city of Ahmedabad. According to the census of India, Ahmedabad is the fifth largest city and the seventh largest metropolitan of India. Ahmedabad is considered to be the economic capital of the progressive state of Gujarat with an urban population of 4,525,013(census, 2001). In 2010, the Forbes magazine rated Ahmedabad as the fastest-growing city in India. This indicates high presence of global brands in Ahmedabad. Currently, McDonald, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Levi's, Lee, MTV, L'oreal, Maybelline, Garnier, Reebok, Adidas among others are ventured into Ahmedabad.

Culture is subjective, multi-faceted, diverse term. Each individual in the society comprehends culture differently. To overcome the bias of the respondent coming into the research, Qualitative research was conducted. Also, as suggested by Kassarian (1977), rigid quantitative categories may not be relevant when the "subjects' language and mode of expression is crucial to the investigation". Further Denzin and Lincoln (2000) claim that qualitative research involves an interpretive and naturalistic approach: "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (p. 3). Qualitative research is essential when there is little knowledge of a research area which deals with –the questions of subjective experience and situational meaning|| (Davies et al., 2009: 6). Qualitative approach provides –a better opportunity for conveying sensitivity|| (Davies et al., 2009: 6).

Focus groups are a qualitative data collection method which aid researchers in learning the different perspectives that exist within that community or subgroup. Focus groups captures group interactions that activate memories, feelings and experiences (Asbury, 1995; Folch-Lyon & Frost, 1981; Morgan 1996). Some have recognised that culture needs to be considered in focus group work (Knodel, 1995).

The discussion guide line was prepared prior to the focus groups based on the literature review conducted. The flow of the focus group was divided into three sessions. The first session dwelt on understanding culture, the second session was to find out the element of culture- like language, dress, food habits, festivals, belief in religion, adherence to rituals and customs as well comprehend the meaning of each, and the third session was to understand the changes in the culture.

The focus group discussions focussed on discussing certain questions such as

- What is culture?
- What are the elements of culture? What do they mean?
- How have these elements of culture changed?
- What has brought about these changes?

Focus Group Participant Recruitment and Composition

Eight focus group discussions were conducted with consumers across age groups and gender. Four focus group discussions were conducted with respondents across age groups (18 years to 24 years) and another four focus groups were conducted with people in the age group of 65 years and above. Respondents were had basic graduation and were from both gender. These two age groups were selected because the age group of 18 to 24 years had lived majority of their life with easy accessibility of global brands while the age group 65 years and above, had led a life of simplicity and deprivation. They were aware of the traditional culture of India.

Analysis of the focus group discussions

The focus group discussion was divided into three parts. The first part focussed on understanding culture, the second tried to understand the meaning of various elements of culture and the third on the changes of culture. Since culture is a huge subject, the study will focus only on two aspects of the elements language and Indian values.

Respondents from the eight focus groups share similar view points on culture. According to them, "Culture was something that they learned from their family, society and friends. There was no textbook that taught culture, but they learned it from the society". Most of the respondents agreed on the elements of culture. The elements are mentioned by the two groups are Language, Dress, Indian Values, Traditions, Customs and Rituals and Religion.

As stated earlier, the study would focus only on the two elements – Language and Indian Values

Language: Language was the mother-tongue that we used for

communication. But, apart from that, it communicated many things.

Age group 18 to 24 years: Respondents in these groups mentioned that the way they spoke communicated their personality to their friends. Language was an important part of their personality. For example, if a girl is wearing stylish clothes but speaks in Gujarati, she is "desi", while the same girl would communicate in English; she would be "cool". The dialect used was also important. Knowing the right words meant you belonged to the hip and cool category while, not being fluent in English meant that you were "uncool". They were not concerned about the richness of the language or the literature part of it. They all concurred that their tone was very casual while talking but that did not indicate their lack of seriousness. This age group used foul language, mixed words from different languages and used casual words.

Age group 65 years and above:

Language was considered to be an integral part of culture. It was important to know how to communicate, what to say, when to say and whom to say it to. They said language was also about the unspoken part. The body language and gestures were important. For this generation, talking in the mother tongue was important. They were proud of their language and its heritage. Most of them had read Gujarati literature. The purity of the language defined the person's status in the society. The person command over the language indicated he was an educated person. Usage of foul words indicated that you belonged to the wrong strata.

Reasons for change

Respondents across age groups agreed that global media, global advertisements and western music affected their language and its perception. Most of the respondents in the younger age group watched MTV regularly. Roadies and Splitsvilla were their favourite shows. Emotional Atyachhar again a copy of the American show – "Cheaters" was watched regularly. These channels used foul words as normal words. That made it acceptable for the younger age group to use it. These shows contain as a part of their storyline, certain casualness, gestures and attitude towards other people which is not reflective of the Indian values. The youngsters imbibe these attitudes, gestures and casualness in their approach to be a part of today's generation. Increase in the penetration of television is most urban households, have allowed these youngsters to see their choice of channels. The household does not sit together to see the same show, hence the youngsters stated that they get the privacy to see the shows they want. Hence the frequency of watching shows with western format without disturbance is high. The parents are not aware of their children's media habits.

Advancement in technology has made western music accessible to the people of India. The respondents listen to western music. Some of lyrics in the western music have obscene words. Since, these youngsters tend to sing these songs or hear them often; these words become a part of their dictionary. Usage of foul words is not a part of our Indian values.

Global advertisements have focused on youth. Most advertisements focus around the youth culture. These global brands to form a relationship with their target audience communicate to them in their language. The advertisements do not use foul language due to the regulatory control act but use gestures, actions and other non-verbal techniques to communicate. These are absorbed and are reflected back in their communication.

The second element for the study was

Values – Values, being an important part of culture had a lot of subjectivity. There are a lot of subsets like – being religious, truthfulness, dignity, family values, kind of clothes and societal behavioral norms as Indian values. These subsets determined if you adhered to Indian values or not.

Age group 18 to 24 years: All the respondents agreed to the subsets but refuted their significance as well as the old definitions. For example, truthfulness was replaced by street smartness.

You did not need to speak the truth always. The definition of family was only the immediate family consisting of parents and siblings. The rest was extended family and did not have a say in their life. The society was not important their friends were. The behaviour was governed by peer pressure and not the old society pressure. Your dressing did not indicate that you did not have the right values. You could wear stylish western clothes and still be religious, you would not listen to your relatives but you took care of your parents. Your physical appearance, your style of speaking, your actions did not communicate your values. Shopping was one of the favourite hobbies of most youngsters in this age groups. They were very indulgent in their purchases. They changed their mobile every year and their laptop every two year. Their frequency of purchase of brands was very high. The youngsters also stated that they had become selfish since they wanted everything for themselves. Since, their needs were so high, the concept of sharing was alien to them.

Age group 65 years and above: These respondents were in a constant dilemma. They had grown up with a different set of Indian values that had been preached to them. These values spoke about collectivism, family orientation, society relationships, respect for elders, keeping the family name intact, importance of the right kind of clothes for the right occasion, simple, utilitarian and being religious. The respondents mentioned that, the age group from 18 to 24 years was difficult to understand. They were confident of their knowledge and hence did not take advice from elders. They stated their opinions to whomever irrespective of age or gender. They took care of their family, but they had redefined this definition limiting it to only their parents and siblings. They were a part of religious ceremonies, auspicious occasions but they decided on their wardrobe which was not always Indian. This generation was bold, confident, arrogant, and religious. Moreover, the youngsters owned more than they needed, whether it was apparels, shoes, gadgets among other things. They mentioned every Indian except for the super rich grew up with the basics irrespective of the money his or her family owned. In the olden days, flaunting wealth was considered uncouth and vulgar. Moreover, youngsters had become more selfish and self-centered. Their needs took a priority before the families.

Reasons for change

Easy availability of global brands had lured the people to the malls. Global brands with their sales promotions lured the people to their stores and have over a period of time made them

indulgent and materialistic. Economic independence has increased but so have the needs of the Indian family. Global apparel brands had made western clothes as regular wear for the Indian youngster. Local brand had followed suit but this has resulted in creating brand consciousness among youngsters. Global footwear brands had fueled the needs, making the youngster indulgent. Global media, telecasted western shows which communicated unconsciously their culture of individualism, materialism and indulgence. Global media exposed the deprived Indian to the luxuries of the western world. Since, these global brands were easily available, the Indian wanted to be a part of that. The increase in the advertisement spends of global brands also made the Indian consumer indulgent. These youngsters had grown up in a typical loving Indian family; hence they cared for their parents and catered to their needs. They attended family occasions and celebrated festivals but they defined their way.

Effect on the culture of the urban people

The above focus group indicates that there seem to be two segments existing in our Indian society. The important ramifications of the above research are the seeds of Individualism, materialism and confidence growing in new India. The youngster has started taking his own decision. With increase in the penetration of television, more households had multiple television sets. The youngsters decided on their choice of channel. The first seeds of individualism creep in here. They were not watching their choice of channel alone, without the disturbance of the family members. With increase in television viewing, exposure to advertisements has gone up. These advertisements tend to lure the customer.

Post liberalization, there has been some cultural shifts in India's culture, the consumer learnt to earn more, spend more, buy international – foreign as well as national brands, connect with the world, become more competitive, confident and selfish. He is ready to take on the world and if that has brought in some changes which had been a tradition since generations, he is willing to take them. Individualism, Consumerism, his role and relationship with the society has witnessed a change. The joint family which was considered to be India's strength is witnessing a change. Certain elements of culture like dress, society norms, traditions, value systems, are changing. Rituals, festivals, faith in religion among others are still followed as before. Individualism and Consumerism have become an integral part of the rural consumer.

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