

Digital Consumerism: Conflicting Perspectives

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Abstract: We, the people of internet era, read, shop, bank and date online, all thanks to ever growing number of websites, services and applications accessible via different devices that did not exist a decade ago. Today's consumer, presented with the vast e-market, has been quick to integrate digital tools into everyday life. It can be said that internet usage has fundamentally altered the human behaviour and lifestyle. Over the past decade or so, we've been watching the realization of a slow revolution in consumerism not seen since credit and debit cards hit the market. Consumer loyalty is a valuable thing, but never has it been more valuable than in the age of the social network. Consequently, the internet has had an important economic impact, both for individuals and nations, in terms of the new businesses and business models it has brought about. India is a fast-moving nation towards digital economy and this movement has been accelerated with the demonetization of the Indian Currency in the last quarter of year 2016. The paper presents statistics on the internet landscape in India and then dwells on the details of digital consumerism wherein the consumption behaviour has received special importance. The conflicting perspectives on consumption by consumers and producers are presented. These perspectives are found to be unsustainable and environmentally harming. Hence, the paper concludes by throwing some light on a different approach towards consumption which can act as reformatory in this area. Sustainable consumption levels need to be found and working with new technologies more mindfully is significant. Also, the ICT policies in India must also be linked to investment in education in order to develop the necessary skills and raise level of literacy. India needs to employ a proactive approach in implementing smarter policies so that it will be better prepared to respond to future challenges.

Keywords: Consumerism, Digital, ICT, India, Internet, Marketing.

I. INTRODUCTION

From shopping to entertainment to socialising to managing the household, digital technologies have changed the way we live. If we look at the way internet has changed the behaviour of travellers, we find that today they use their phones to board planes and unlock hotel rooms, monitor devices at home (for example, temperature and alarm settings). Social media hasn't just changed the way we purchase; it's changed something integral about the way we communicate. Customised mobile technologies and apps (uber, fasoos etc.) provide services to countless sub-segments of consumers with particular needs. These sub-segments have been developed recently.

India's younger population of early adopters is using internet at an increasing rate and usage patterns are shifting dramatically. The old generation has also started taking interest in internet activities e.g., connecting to old friends through facebook, paying electricity bills, studying their bank account statements etc.

As per the ITU report (2016), the Financial Times (FT) 500 ranking, which ranks companies based on their revenues, included several of the new internet companies, such as Amazon.com (ranked 18th), Alphabet (which includes Google, ranked 36th), Facebook (ranked 157th) and eBay (ranked 300th). The FT 500 included over 50 companies from the technology and telecommunication sector, including Microsoft (25th), Cisco Systems (54th), and IMB (31st). Apple, whose key products, including its Iphone, build on the success of the internet, ranked third in terms of revenues, but was touted the world's most valuable company in terms of market value.

The main reason behind the outstanding success of the internet economy and internet user growth is the increased competition in the telecom market. This competition led to decrease in the price of internet access services and devices which further expanded to the technological advances in mobile broadband networks. This trend has led to new business models like the on-demand economy. A person's location is used in order to offer convenient access to goods and services e.g., Uber and swiggy. Mobile connectivity has also a huge impact on how people use the internet with new devices. There are services and applications which are especially tailored to a mobile lifestyle, e.g., smart watches for exercising, and reality games such as Pokémon Go.

As per NASSCOM study (2016), in the last two-three years, mobile devices are ushering in yet another revolution by bringing the internet to India's hinterland, where infrastructure woes crippled access to the internet so far. This is because mobile fulfils the three key criteria— affordability, scale, and convenience required for easy access to the rural masses. From agriculture to education, business to healthcare, mobile internet is changing lives in rural areas for the better.

The free exchange of information through both the Internet and social media means that every consumer is equipped with the tools for in-depth research about a brand or product. Rather than having to rely on the testimony of a sales associate, or advertising, or a magazine review, a consumer can simply look to their social networks to see what people think. The free exchange of information and ideas has led to a shift in consumer perspective and spending habits.

In wealthy countries around the world, clothes shopping have become a widespread pastime, a powerfully pleasurable and sometimes addictive activity that exists as a constant hum in our lives, much like social media. The internet and the proliferation of inexpensive clothing have made shopping a form of cheap, endlessly available entertainment—one where the point isn't what, or even whether, you buy, but the act of shopping itself. Consumers have always liked free stuff – but now more than ever, they're actively seeking it. Digitally active consumers have embraced the internet, telecom, media, and social space; changing the way they communicate, transact and make purchase decisions, thus leading to the birth of an era of digital consumerism, says the KPMG in India report.

This paper looks into the internet landscape in India and the internet economy with reference to digital consumerism. Secondary data from various government and non-government agencies and consultancy firms has been used. The environmental spillover of digital consumerism has been critically examined. A different approach towards consumption needs to be employed. Slowing down might be the answer for the worldwide addiction to economic growth. In the end, the reforms required in the digital marketing are discussed while keeping the future of internet in mind.

II. INTERNET STATISTICS OF INDIA

The growing economic stature of India has received wide recognition. It is apparent that we have an advantage of a large low-wage workforce, but that can never be the foundation of an economic superpower. India is still largely a rural economy—as per Census 2011, 68.8 per cent in India is rural. The rising per capita growth rate of India has helped to lift many people out of poverty. But still, the share of persons below the \$1.90/day poverty line is 21.9 per cent (<http://data.worldbank.org>). Between 2001 and 2011, in India, the middle class share of the population grew from 1 per cent to 3 per cent (Poushter, 2017).

II.1 Internet Landscape and Usage

Countries are experimenting with various approaches in order to develop their internet foundations which are customised to local contexts that take advantage of unique local strengths. Internet penetration in India is only 34.40 per cent (Table I). As per www.internetworldstats.com, 13.5 per cent of the world internet users belong to India. The average speed of the internet connection in general and speed of internet on mobile in particular is quite low in India.

TABLE I: INTERNET LANDSCAPE

| | Internet Users (in million) 30-Jun-17 | Penetration (% of population) | Average internet connection speed (in Mbps) Q1 2017 | Average Mobile net speed (in Mbps) | Share of World internet users (%) | Growth 2000-2017(%) |
|-------|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---------------------|
| India | 462 | 34.40 | 6.5 | 1.7 | 13.5 | 9142.50 |

Source: www.internetworldstats.com and www.internetlivestats.com, Akamai report, Q1 2017, Digital, Social and Mobile in APAC, March 2015

Globally, half of all internet users got online in February 2017 using mobile devices, and over 45 per cent visited the web on desktops during the same time period (Bhattacharya, 2017). It is observed that per day internet use of an Indian internet user is substantive (Table II). The laptop and desktop usage is quite low. This could be due to the mobile revolution which has presented the users with diverse options of smart-phones and apps. As per BCG (2012), the Indian internet users are adopting social networking quickly as they come online through facebook, twitter etc on their mobiles.

TABLE II: INTERNET USAGE

| | Per day internet use (hrs) | Time spent per day on Social media (hrs) | Internet access on Laptop/Desktop | Internet access on Mobile | Mobile internet users (in million) |
|--------------|----------------------------|--|-----------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| India | 5.1 | 2 | 31% | 68% | 442 |

Source: Digital, Social and Mobile in APAC, March 2015

India's digital trajectory has skipped some generations like the desktop and catapulted straight to mobile. The medium's affordability, ease of use for even the tech unsavvy, and portability has put potential digital access in the hands of over 1 billion mobile subscribers (936 million active mobile connections). Data, though, is not as affordable as the device itself and finds many Indians accessing the internet through their systems at the workplace (BCG, 2012).

II.II Internet Health and Foundation

McKinsey Study (2012) has provided extensive data on the Internet Foundation Statistics of 57 countries. The relevant data on internet foundations is exported from the study and presented in the form of a spider chart (Figure I). India is performing poorly in the areas of Internet accessibility and Global connectedness while the performance in the area of business environment is comparatively better.

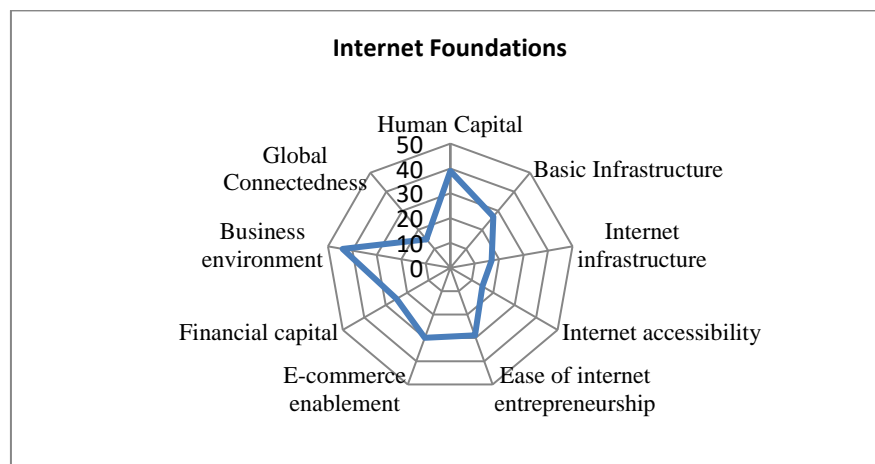


FIGURE I: INTERNET FOUNDATION STATISTICS

Note: Scores indicate percentile rank of the country across a sample of 57 countries. The best-performing country on each score receives a score of 100, while the worst-performing country in our sample receives a 0.

Source: Data inputs by McKinsey Study 2012.

III. INTERNET ECONOMY

Digital technologies enable businesses to find and access new markets and customers and this helps them to operate more efficiently. It becomes easier for the businesses to bring new products and other innovations to consumers. Internet contributed 4.1 per cent of GDP in India for the year 2010 and 5.6 per cent in 2016 (Table III). The net exports contribute the highest to the GDP. India stands out for its enormous internet-related exports- services- which propel their internet economy rankings towards the top of the charts.

TABLE III: INTERNET ECONOMY

| | India | |
|---|-------|------|
| | 2010 | 2016 |
| Internet Economy as a percentage of GDP | 4.1 | 5.6 |
| GDP Contribution (\$ Billions) | | |
| Govt spending | 2 | 11 |
| Investment | 12 | 32 |
| Consumption | 14 | 108 |
| Net Exports | 41 | 91 |
| Total | 70 | 242 |

Source: BCG, 2012

The brands or companies which do not have enough capital for establishing a physical branch or store, are working from homes or coffee shops, and are able to provide their product online which creates their market. Such brands have a very selective group of customers for whom they customize the product. This gives a special feeling to the customer and the customer finds himself valued and worthy for the brand. So, we can say that digital economies bring more people and more businesses into the economic mainstream; they make it possible for more of them to participate in economic and social institutions.

**FIGURE II: E-COMMERCE SHARE OF TOTAL RETAIL SALES**

Note: Forecast 2016 onwards

Source: <https://www.statista.com/statistics/379167/e-commerce-share-of-retail-sales-in-india/>

As per BCG 2012 report, the Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) that make extensive use of the web grow faster. India's e-commerce share (Figure II) in 2014 is 0.8 per cent which is forecasted at 4.8 per cent in 2019 (www.statista.com). Given their agility and ability to innovate, one would expect SMEs to grasp the power of the internet to build their businesses. Indeed, many companies have helped turned the web into an important vehicle for revenue growth and job creation (BCG, 2012).

III.1 Digital Consumerism

Consumption turns into an 'ism' when material objects are used to express affection and to seek self-esteem, and when they dominate the quest for self-actualisation. It is this 'ism' that turns consumption into a social disease (Etzioni). As per The Huffington Post (2013), Consumerism -- which has been called a "modern religion" -- tends to capitalize on this insecurity

and use it to sell products. New deliveries to stores are frequent, which means customers always have something new to look at and want. Zara stores get two new shipments of clothes each week, while H&M and Forever21 get clothes daily. In 1991, Americans purchased an average of 40 garments per person, according to the American Apparel & Footwear Association. In 2013, it was up to 63.7 garments, down from a peak of 69 just before the recession. That means on average Americans buy more than one item of clothing each week (Marc Bain).

Consumer loyalty is a valuable thing, but never has it been more valuable than in the age of the social network. Whereas before, a person might share their love of a particular brand with a few associates at work, a few family members at home, and a few close friends out in public; they'll now endorse your product to friends on their social networks. It's not just their friends, either. Users will even examine what strangers are saying about a brand or product online before making a purchasing decision. In today's society, it's easier to stay connected than it is to disconnect from the world. This trend has bled over into purchasing habits: most users will research new products and services using their tablets or smartphones, and most users will log in to their social network using their mobile devices.

The way we browse and communicate on social networks has caused consumers, as a whole, to be increasingly visual communicators. It's a trend known as the visual social media era. Compared to the in-store experience, the consumer can browse more quickly than strolling down the aisles, and can do so 24 hours a day, without ever having to head to the mall. In Germany, almost two-thirds (65 per cent) of the population used the Internet for shopping in 2013. Delayed deliveries, damaged goods and even items supplied by mistake are not uncommon. Furthermore, consumers are not able to inspect goods in advance of purchase, a major concern in the case of expensive electrical items or cars. But it appears that online shoppers are not deterred by such disadvantages: The convenience and above all the ease of price comparison seem to compensate for any disadvantages of e-commerce for online shoppers.

III.II Supply side strategy

Professor David Cadman, writing in *Resurgence* in April 2003, points out that "the doctrine of consumption and economic growth is not primarily founded on 'satisfaction' but upon 'dissatisfaction'". Cadman quotes from Robert Lane's *The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies*: "Advertising must use dissatisfaction to achieve its purpose" and shows that this deliberately misleading aspect of consumer culture dates back to Edward Bernays who, in the 1930s, applied his experience of US wartime propaganda to the foundation of what is now modern-day consumerism: "Bernays understood that the appetite of our present materialism depends upon stirring up our wants – but not satisfying them."

The rise in the number of consumers who shop online, seek recommendations and interact with brands presents a tremendous opportunity for companies. KPMG in India has identified and analysed six major disruptive technologies which will have a significant impact on key industries, and will lead to the next wave of innovations. These technologies are embedded systems, augmented reality, mobility, social media, cloud computing & big data. After almost a century of customers "going to the store," the store is now coming to the customer (KPMG 2013). We can say this is a major step taken by the marketing branch which adds up to the 'stirring up our wants'.

There is evidence to prove that online retailing is likely to be seen as a complement or substitute to offline retailing (Rezaei et al., 2014). The low price online retail shops are causing a great consumer surplus (Dobbs et al., 2013). To facilitate the frequent markdowns they offer, several now inflate their initial retail prices. They're able to protect their margins and let customers believe they're getting a deal, enticing them to buy. Andrew Lipsman, vice president of marketing and insights at internet research firm ComScore, says that mobile shopping in particular has "exploded." Lipsman points out that this mobile browsing didn't necessarily lead to purchases. Browsing is also about research, and entertainment. "It is more than just transactional," he says. It is clear, however, that more and more Indians are shopping online, and early evidence suggests they are shopping more often. The obsession with looking at products, even if no purchase is intended, is especially prevalent among millennials, the generation that grew up in the age of the internet. A report by the Urban Land Institute, a nonprofit focused on responsible land use, concluded that 45 percent of millennials (called Generation Y in the report) spend more than an hour each day looking at retail sites (Marc Bain). According to Li (1999) online shoppers are more acquainted with convenience rather than experience. For them, convenience is the most significant aspect when making purchases as they have limited time and are not as bothered by the idea of purchasing goods without physically touching them (Li & Zhang, 2002). In the present society, advertising and marketing have shaped consumers behaviour and their psychological profiles.

Online giants such as Amazon, with huge warehouses sell a massive array of products. These are often at lower costs, due to fewer overheads such as renting stores on every high street and employing staff in every store; causing economic pressure as well as consumer pressure (McLaren, 2012). Consumers can look, for example, at books in stores, and then purchase them, cheaper online, with the option of next day delivery, arriving as soon as possible. Many bookstores consider Amazon the major threat on their industry (Bosman, 2012). Shoppers do not want to pay for parking when there is no guarantee the goods required are available; stores have to acknowledge they are sending customers online, and make the necessary changes (Loveday, 2013).

III.III Spillover on the Environment

Landfills are overstuffed with clothing and shoes that don't break down easily. Consumers run the risk of ending up on a hedonic treadmill in which the continuous pursuit of new stuff leaves them unhappy and unfulfilled. It is no accident that shopping has become such an absorbing and compulsive activity. The reasons are in our neurology, economics, culture, and technology. These conditions make it easy for people to buy things they don't need or even really want.

If we compare online shopping with shopping locally based on environmental damage, at first sight, the arguments that online shopping is better for the environment are plausible. Whereas for example a clothes shop has to be air-conditioned and supplied with electricity all the year round, online customers can order their new products from home. The goods are then delivered to the required address along with lots of other parcels, saving the customer a journey, possibly by car. If we save money or time when we are shopping, we notice it immediately in our wallets or on our watches. However, CO₂ emissions are not directly noticeable. In Germany alone, every third online order is returned. Transportation is the biggest contributor to carbon emissions in both retail and e-tail product pathways. When purchasing a book from a bookstore, each household drives separately, but delivery trucks take purchases to many customers on a single route. There's also a decent chance that the delivery truck is more fuel-efficient than your family sedan. Shrink-wrapping, padding and boxing each individual novella, as e-tailers do, is hardly going to maximize materials efficiency and minimize waste. Likewise, the energy consumed to browse and purchase books online is much less than that needed to build, light, heat, and cool physical bookstores. By streamlining the purchase and delivery process, e-tailers minimize the need for buildings and their associated energy usage. Buying multiple books from the same seller results in fewer emissions than ordering one at a time, and of course walking or biking to the bookstore, or combining book purchases with other errands in the area, can draw down the carbon footprint of a bookstore visit. But a recent study in Newark, Delaware suggests that the knock-on effects of online shopping may worsen traffic congestion and transport-related carbon emissions. On the other hand the world's current consumer habits cause serious environmental issues and the population growth rivals consumption as a cause of ecological decline (www.theguardian.com).

IV. STOP AND THINK

Every single user – bar none – usually has a million things going on at once. Most of the users are stimulated in so many ways and from so many angles, we barely have time to devote to any one thing these days. As a result, there's a whole lot of white noise. In the past few years a "slow fashion" movement has emerged which emphasizes buying less clothing and sticking to garments made using sustainable, ethical practices. Residents of industrialized societies are not all doomed to endless "compensatory" shopping just because our brains seem to enjoy it and our cultures are set up for it. The five-minute break from work you take to look at clothes doesn't necessarily mean you're searching for your identity in a pair of pants, or that you're trying to fill a void.

What is not shown on our online shopping receipt is the "feedback effect". This results in an unfavourable eco-balance. In their study on 'Online shopping and home working' (2010), scientists at the Institution of Engineering and Technology at Newcastle University talk about the 'feedback effects' of changing shopping habits. What is actually a positive incentive to reduce CO₂ emissions – shopping online instead of driving to the shops – is cancelled out by the negative environmental impact of returned parcels. We need to critically examine our own shopping habits.

A civil society requires some form of self-government; citizens must have the capacity to restrain themselves. The desire to consume ever more leads to working weeks that leave too little time and energy to spend on those aspects that contribute to a good life: family, friends, community services and contemplation. People need to realise that contained consumption is not a reflection of failure. It is rather the liberation of society which grants people new freedoms from an obsession. Scaled down levels of consumption should not be seen as deprivation but as positive expressions of a new lifestyle approved by a new normative culture. Critics argue that a modern economy cannot survive unless people consume ever more, and

hence produce and work more. But this is no reason an economy cannot function well if both parts of the equation are scaled back: if people consume less and produce/work less. This is, in effect, what the French do, with their 35-hour workweeks and personal income per capita that is somewhat lower than the United States (Etzioni). To address this issue of consumerism, education will be a good weapon for changing unnecessary consumption, culture and the behaviours of the world. India's literacy rate is at 74.04 per cent. Kerala is the most literate state in India, with 93.91 per cent literacy. Six Indian states account for about 70 per cent of all illiterates in India: Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. Thus increasing literacy will positively affect the digital marketing growth in India (Census 2011).

Now, let us look at the other perspective, the perspective which supports the idea of fuelling the consumption sector. India is a fast moving nation towards digital economy and this movement has been accelerated with the demonetization of the Indian Currency in the last quarter of year 2016. With it, various government digital payment promotion schemes have been launched.

Digital market requires digital promotion and marketing strategies. Three changes are unfurling. *First*, the significance of pure play social media will diminish soon. Being more affordable than TV and print and with a looming mandate by CXOs for their organizations to go digital, marketing teams in India are scrambling to tick the box and demonstrate digital savvy by overt social media marketing. This is followed quickly by a comparison of followers and engagements and awards for creative content. Remaining largely in the creative space, this is the part of digital marketing that is neither driven strategically nor pillared on meaningful attribution. The advertising budgets, generally precludes the large investments that go into digitally transforming an organization from within. Pure social media management has already begun to lose relevance and marketing efforts typically hit a wall at legacy infrastructure. Marketers will be forced to build their digital ecosystem beyond digital marketing. The big responsibility here is shifting from the CMO to the CDO and CTO. *Second*, in the longer term data science will begin to replace “hit and try” digital marketing. On the other hand, engagement models will have to give way to behaviour modelling based on data. Though in its infancy, Indian retail and financial sectors have realized the need and opportunity for data science and are making strides in the right direction. *Third*, a national digital strategy will no longer suffice. With digital proliferation, India has begun connecting with “Bharat” more unabashedly. And Bharat too is in turn creating regional connected communities. Marketing departments can no longer view India as 29 states and 7 Union Territories. It's now a country of millions of micro communities – being formed by regional clusters, cultural and lifestyle orientations and service exchange groups. Defining them merely by demographic and psychographic parameters will veil the real market potential. These micro-groups need micro-influencing fields around them. Digital marketing is running on a trial and error mode. There are only a handful of digital strategists in India and they are bringing a combination of UGC (User Generated Content) + IGC (Influencer Generated Content) + BGC (Brand Generated Content) in a relevant and purposeful manner. We need to develop this skill deeper and wider.

V. CONCLUSION

Internet, the greatest disruptor of our age, is all set to change the way we work, interact with friends, family and co-workers, and live life in general. The internet is bringing newer experiences such as VR, AR, gaming, Smart TVs, thereby leading towards the Internet of things (IoT) in our homes. As IoT continues to transition from being a futuristic technology to one that is beginning to impact almost every aspect of day to day life, the internet is only bound to change the society forever. With the Indian Government's focus on Digital India and smart cities, there's little doubt that the internet is going to bring about a change needed for the greater good of the country.

The digital era nurtured consumerism. New business models emerged to capture and sustain commercial value. The sparks of innovation began to ignite inside people, which could not be suppressed. The concept of new firm formation was liberated from the wealthy. Entrepreneurism accelerated and shifted from starting local business to building global corporations. The current state is highly volatile with efforts directed more towards communication and establishing digital footprints. The next phase, and it's not far away, will have to be technology-enabled Customer Experience Transformation that will require organisations to rebuild from within and make themselves agile enough to keep up with the highly dynamic market that is India. Countries that take a proactive approach in implementing smarter policies now will be better prepared to respond to future challenges, and thus reap the benefits of more inclusive communities and richer economic prospects. But somewhere down the line, the nations will be compelled to take a different approach, the approach of slowing down in order to sustain the survival. Producing less and consuming less shall not be taken as a failure of the nation. In fact it should be seen as a kind of de-addiction to the concept of economic growth.

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