

CONSUMED CULTURE AND CULTURED CONSUMPTION THE DIDEROT EFFECT ON CONSUMERS

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Abstract *This paper argues that culture constrains consumption as well as gets itself transformed. Culture resists change as much as it is consumed by changes. Neglecting cultural considerations one would be unable to understand marketing in particular and business in general. Applying the theory of Denis Diderot who sees both unity and effect of culture consumption, the paper discusses the ways Indian consumers are both constrained and transformed by consumption by tacit communication of cultural meaning attributed to products. Studying consumption in Chennai city by youth of fastfood such as KFC and McDonald, the paper explains the ways in which Tamil cultural habits are fast transformed after the entry of the foods. It further confirms the fact that consumption is not just an economic activity but a cultural activity in that meaning-transfer must be paid sufficient attention to realize what really happens in buying and selling consumer goods.*

Keywords *Indian Consumers, Culture and Consumption*

There is an organic link between culture and consumption. One isolated from the other is not understood substantively. Often in the field of marketing we tend to view consumption purely as economic activity and insulate it from cultural environment. Largely, due to the lack of recognition of the link and impoverished view of business, often loses its consumers in market and in return we fail to understand consumer behavior, especially their decision making process. This paper looks at the link between culture and consumption by explaining how culture controls consumption as well as how consumption transforms culture. To understand this link, the paper makes use of Diderot Effect that explains how culture constrains and transforms pattern of consumption and how transfer or communication of cultural meaning makes transformative impact on cultures.

The Diderot Effect

The Diderot effect is defined as “a force that encourages the individual to maintain a cultural consistency in his/her complement of consumer goods” (McCracken 1990:123). It is a cultural phenomenon related to consumer goods relating two ideas: 1) products bought by consumers will be suited to their sense of identity, and will be complementary to one another; 2) explains that the introducing of a new possession is seen as deviant to the consumers current complementary goods, results in a process of spiraling consumption. Grant McCracken in 1988 coined the term named after Denis Diderot. It is a consumption process in which a purchase creates dissatisfaction with existing possessions and cultural environment and results in a spiral of consumption with negative environmental, psychological and social impacts. This I call consumed culture.

Denis Diderot (1713-1784) studied the unity and effect of the impact of culture and consumption. The way he did it, is very perceptive and creative. Let me explain it. Diderot receives a dressing gown as a gift. Overwhelmed by the new possession he replaces his old gown. Later, he realizes that his desk is not up to the standard (of the gown) and decides to replace it. This leads to his perception that the tapestry hanging in the hall looks ‘threadbare’ and he wants a new one. After a year or so he changes the entire furnishings – chairs, engravings, bookshelf etc. – to fit to the new gown he received as a gift. By this, Diderot comes to a conclusion that this is the effect of “imperious scarlet robe [which] forced everything else to conform with its own elegant tone” (1964:311). The new gown persuades the consumer (Diderot) to forge unity by making all other objects in the study table suitable to its standard. The costly and beautiful gown does not fit into the study where objects are not up to the standard of the gown. This is what he calls ‘unity’. Immediately, he also feels that he has lost the harmony he enjoyed with his old gown that was fit to the minimum and that is the simple study area. This unity and effect Diderot suggests points to the meaning a consumer infuses in consumption: consumers understand the meaning of a product in the presence of complementary products. More sharply, consumer goods seem to ‘go together’. The Diderot effect is both conservative and radical; it protects consumers from alien culture and allows products to transform culture.

Consumed Culture

McCracken explains that the Diderot effect works in three ways. One, it prevents existing goods from entering into the

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goods having cultural significance that is inconsistent with the entire environment. Two, it forces a spiral of purchase of new set of consumer goods. Third, the consumer exploits the Diderot effect for symbolic purposes.

The first way in Diderot effect instructs us that a product that has different cultural meaning is prevented from entering into the system of goods coming from different cultural patterns. Pizza is often prevented from entering into the kitchen where so far *idly* or *dosa* were made.¹ In the same way, in a Pizza restaurant rice is not allowed. We can see this spectacularly in the attempts of socialists in India, who are against Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) that they argue it would kill small time entrepreneurs and local businesses. More clearly, we could see in the pattern of habits of children and youth that overwhelms the native habits; the coffee drinking is largely replaced by coke drinking habit.

Second way works in a way that an entry of a consumer good into one's life would transform the entire life of the consumer. From the time of entry, the new product demands companion goods. This power of consistency gradually transforms the cultural environment. A college student buys a low-hip trouser. But he is told to buy a branded inner brief, *Jockey* that will be visible when the trouser lowers down. It does not stop there. His hairstyle changes to be consistent with the trouser. Even his relationship with other boys and girls looks for consistency. He picks up a language and way of communication to keep up with his purchase. One has to only observe keenly a campus in Chennai city to realize how the Diderot effect is at work. The link between a consumer good and the meaning it carries has a mutual effect to transform a cultural system. Gradually, it changes the environment in which a consumer uses a consumer good. In the case of Diderot, the dressing gown forced Diderot to perceive a cultural meaning of the product (the gown) as a vehicle of privileged meaning and persuaded him to keep the rest of his possessions consistent with it. The meaning of consumer goods originates from their position in a system of goods, which is related to a system of cultural categories. There is a correspondence between consumer goods and cultural categories. In today's capitalistic consumer society, products or services are modeled after American way of life and patterns of its culture. When someone in India buys a KFC chicken he develops distaste for his native foods like rice or wheat *roti*. Then gradually all other purchases he tends to see as consistent with the fast food culture. Eating a burger in a fast food restaurant for a college student is not just an ordinary act of having food. Going beyond the eating it brings the entire culture of North America into his life that replaces his cultural life. He starts wearing dresses such as

t-shirts, jeans trousers and changes his hairstyle. Further in his choice of interactions with other students is also directed by the low-hip trouser. Eating *dosa* (flour pan cake) or rice becomes alien habits to this boy. Often in Chennai city campuses students from villages see their lives transformed by the purchases they do in order to be consistent with the campus culture. Only when they return home, they find themselves alienated from the cultural environment existing at home. His dhoti-clad father finds it hard to understand it.

The third way the Diderot effect works is more symbolic. Owning a branded product gives the consumer an identity and more than utilities of the product it symbolizes an identity that is consistent with the product. Having smart phone for a college student in Chennai is more than the functionality. He moves on to a class of people and standard of life, or at least, he thinks that he is in that state. In the third way, people purchase a new product and then dispose off. They return to their original pattern of purchase. Consumers who have been used to buy branded products stop the purchase and go to native products. For example, students in some colleges decide, as a group or an individual, start using locally produced products and natural foods and fight against multinational products; in one campus in Chennai city whenever the management allows sale of coke in its canteen there will be a student group, who protest against it and they see to it that the sale is stopped. By doing this, the consumers make a statement about their identity. It is a symbolic status to have an Audi car for so many Indians that explains amply a state of the consumer beyond utility of the vehicle. A BMW car is associated with a class of people and a particular standard of living. That car would persuade the consumer to acquire other products only suitable to its standard, because "the meaning of a good is best (and sometimes only) communicated when this good is surrounded by a complement of goods that carry the same significance" (McCracken, 1990: 121). Owner of BMW car is compelled to buy a Rolex watch. The consistency between products and culture remains as a force that unifies a consumer good with a cultural category. Often in consumption, it is asked what goes together and how one is associated with another.

Among the three ways that Diderot effect works the second way demands our attention and a brief analysis. Any consumer product is culturally grounded and when a consumer of a different culture consumes it, he enters into the culture of the product. For example, KFC chicken is grounded in the culture of Kentucky City. In the time of Great Depression, having an elaborate meal was not possible and seeing a business opportunity Harland Sanders sold only chicken, later added soft drinks like Pepsi. When the same chicken is transported to places like India where meat is not eaten alone, the introduction of KFC chicken brings in a new habit that transforms the ways people in India view life. It consumes the local culture, what the Diderot effect calls 'transformation of culture.' The youth in Tamil Nadu

¹ *Idly* or *dosa* are flour based food mostly used by Tamils. The context of the entire article is Chennai city (South India) that the author is familiar with. Some examples are taken from the city campuses through a year of participant observation.

who are used to foods that are culturally grounded begin to allow KFC chicken into their world of habits. This replaces gradually Tamil food with American food and brings in, other related products into their life.

Cultured Consumption

In consumption, what really happens tacitly is a certain pattern of meaning-transfer by which consumption becomes visibly a cultural activity, consumption is no more economic but a cultural activity. Studying communication of meaning through consumer goods many scholars focused on person-object relationship and its impact (Felson 1976; Furby 1978; Holman 1980; Solomon 1983; Bronner 1983). McCracken (1985) says, we should reaffirm the fact that consumer goods have a significance that takes us beyond their usages and, more sharply, it leads to communication of cultural meaning. The meaning transfer happens for a long time through the efforts of producers, sellers, and advertisements of a product. When a consumer buys a product she comes with a meaning for that product and embraces the meaning context, in which the product was produced. After the purchase, the consumer can either use the product or dispose it later, even having no thought of buying the same again. The cultural change happens only when the consumer assimilates the meaning of the product and allows into his world of products he uses. This entry of product would soon replace similar product.

Blumer (1969) explains this transformation more vividly. He says that individuals interact with objects by giving meaning to them. This interaction is an autonomous action in which actors attribute subjective meaning to objects. The very interaction happens only on the basis of meaning they give to objects. Similarly, meaning of an object is socially constructed and therefore it is not inherent in the object. The meanings are changed or modified by an interpretive process a person uses. This is in a way extended by McCracken, as seen elsewhere, to consumer goods by stating that consumption is completely a cultural phenomenon, "consumption is shaped, driven, and constrained at every point by cultural considerations." (1990:xi). A paradigmatic shift from consumption as economic activity to cultural activity makes a definitive link between culture and consumption. Cultural meaning in many ways directs individuals to transform their life. In Chennai city, the young boys and girls have allowed KFC chicken into their food habits and eating their traditional foods such as *idly*, *dosa* and *rice* are neglected. This does not stop here, it moves further to replace more associated products such as apparels and so on. More deeply, their attitude to life also gradually becomes an imitation of Kentucky City.

In sum, in the study of consumption, communication of cultural meaning demands sufficient understanding as to gain the state of business activity. More importantly, to gain a proper knowledge of the market, culture and consumption

must be seen together. The study of the link between culture and consumption is an important way through which we could gauge the ways in which market functions and its directions lead to. Often study of market is merely seen as commercial activity that loses sight of cultural-ness of the activity. It needs a course correction that has the potential to have a comprehensive understanding of any business. Therefore, studying consumer behavior must be able to recognize the deeply embedded presence of cultural meaning.

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