The Impact of the Internet on Values in India: 
Shifts in Self-Enhancement and Self-Transcendence Amongst Indian Youth

Vicki R. Lane, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA
Jiban Khuntia, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA
Madhavan Parthasarathy, University of Colorado Denver, Denver, CO, USA
Bidyut B. Hazarika, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI, USA

ABSTRACT

In this study, the authors examine how the internet is changing two critical personal value dimensions of India’s youth. Based on values theory, and using data that spans a decade from 2004-2014, they contend that time spent on the internet is an influential factor in changing self-enhancement and self-transcendence values. Given the tremendous increase in exposure to western products, ideals, and people-to-people interaction via internet connectivity (India has over 275 million internet users who communicate in the English language), the authors posit that young Indian consumers would adopt values associated with self-enhancement and individualism, forsaking self-transcendence related ideals. Data pertaining to the Rokeach value scales were collected in New Delhi, and the results support the notion that these values have indeed changed substantially in such a short amount of time, largely due to IT as opposed to other media vehicles such as TV, and print media. Implications of this noteworthy change in values due to the internet in a relatively short period are discussed.

KEYWORDS
Achievement, Benevolence, Internet, Media, Power, Universalism, Values

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the impact of internet subscription on two critical values dimensions, Self-Enhancement and Self-Transcendence, in India, a country that experienced explosive growth in internet subscription from 2004 – 2014. We compare the impact of the internet versus traditional media on the evolution of these values amongst Indian youth. While values are purported to be stable and slow to change (e.g., Rokeach, 1973, p.5), our study finds that important values have indeed changed significantly among Indian youth in the span of merely one decade, a rate of change far more rapid than heretofore measured, almost belying established “values” theory. Equally significant is that this value evolution was triggered largely by the internet, more so than traditional media. Since no prior studies have investigated the impact of the internet on changing values, perhaps because
slow-changing values necessitate an inter-temporal data investigation (such as the decade-wide data span of this research), the results of this study are particularly novel.

This paper focuses on two overarching value dimensions, Self-Enhancement and Self-Transcendence (Schwartz et al. 2001), that closely align with the more commonly used terms of Individualism and Collectivism, because they have substantial importance for businesses. The impact of the internet and media on these value systems is important because consumers often buy products and brands that reflect these values (Beatty et al., 1985; Chen et al., 1999; Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010; Johnson, 2014; Wansink, 2000). Indeed, these values differentiate between various groups based on religion, age, as well as cultural, economic, and political variables (Braithwaite and Law, 1985), distinguish between various consumer behaviors (Beatty et al., 1985), and link to specific brand attributes and benefits (Wansink, 2000). In fact, these value dimensions influence consumer relationships with service providers (Patterson and Smith, 2001; Mattila and Patterson, 2004), consumer innovation (Steenkamp, Hofstede, and Wedel 1999; Yaveroglu and Donthu, 2002), consumer self-concept (Hawkins and Mothersbaugh, 2010), acceptance of foreign products (Gurhan-Canli and Maheswaran, 2000), reactions to marketing communication (Pornpitakpan and Francis, 2001; Choi, Lee, and Kim, 2005), preferences for various sources of information (Money, Gilly, and Graham, 1998), and consumption symbolism (Robinson 1996; Erdem, Swait, and Valenzuela, 2006; Sun, Horn, and Merritt, 2004). Further, self-enhancement and transcendence values, embodied in individualistic and collectivist traits respectively, affect innovativeness and the cross-cultural adoption of products (e.g., Forlani and Parthasarathy, 2003; Parthasarathy et al., 1995).

We implement the study and test the theory amongst Indian youth for several reasons. India is an attractive market for many global companies because it has the third largest economy in the world in terms of purchasing power (Hindustan Times, 2014), with annual purchasing power parity of more than 8.5 trillion dollars (IMF, 2016). By 2025, consumption by Indian consumers is expected to grow to $8.2 trillion, larger than the current US consumption of $7.2 trillion (Ibef.org, 2016). In addition, the youth (aged 15-34 years) population of the country, whose values, as this study shows, are rapidly changing, will increase to 464 million by 2021 (Shivakumar, 2013). To put this in perspective, the youth market in India itself would be larger than the entire population of the United States, making it the third largest “market” in the world. Furthermore, India has concurrently experienced a rapid increase in global media exposure (Satpathi and Roy, 2011; Thussu, 2007) and an explosive increase in the number of internet consumers during the last decade (Internet Live Statistics, 2016). This has resulted in greater exposure to global advertising and to western brands, especially among the young, connected consumers. These changes have led to contentions that Indian consumers are becoming increasingly materialistic and “Americanized” (Batra et al., 2014; Gupta, 2011), and more favorably disposed to global brands over Indian brands (Kinra, 2006; Rao, 2000). Indeed, conspicuous consumption has become a leading differentiator between the rich and the poor (Eng and Bogaert, 2010), which would suggest that core consumer values are evolving.

We demonstrate that the rapid increase in internet subscription from 2004-2014 contributed to the change in these value dimensions amongst Indian youth. Currently, India has over 460 million internet users, more than the United States and second only to China (Internet Live Statistics, 2016), and over 200 million smartphone users (Poushter, 2016; Rai, 2014) who use their mobile phones to access the internet. Indian consumers have also enjoyed greater interaction with citizens of other countries via outsourcing, blogs, forums and chatrooms on the internet, and large-scale adoption of smartphones. Thus, the information and communication technology evolution, increased global connectivity, and one-on-one interaction with western citizens via information access, exchange, and use by Indian consumers should have led to an increased adoption of western individualistic values
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