Chapter 8
The Impact of the Internet on Change in Consumer Values in India: Internet and Values

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ABSTRACT

Has the Internet impacted the core values of consumers, particularly in developing nations? Unlike one-way mass media vehicles such as television, the internet’s two-way, interactive nature allows individuals to communicate in a high-involvement, border-free world via social media, blogs, online forums, and the like. This will result in the trading of values and ideas, and especially in the erosion of traditional value systems in developing nations. This chapter highlights the changes in values in India between 2004 and 2014, with a marked increase in Western individualistic values such as power and achievement, eroding traditional collective values such as universalism among Indian youth during this period. Since consumers buy products that reflect their values, these findings have profound implications for business management and marketing. Further, the general notion that the core values of a society are slow to change is refuted.

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INTRODUCTION

The notion of globalization of culture and markets, where western cultural values, depicted by international mass media channels, have made the world a “global village,” is not new (e.g., McLuhan 1962; Kraidy 2002). The general narrative argues that western television programs and ads were increasingly accessible to developing markets, thanks to satellite and other advanced technology. This, in turn, led to a steady flow of transnational images which encouraged youth in developing countries to adopt a western lifestyle by consuming similar products (e.g., Nike shoes, Coca-Cola, etc.) to their compatriots in developed nations. In the words of Levitt (1984, p. 1) technology “has made isolated places and impoverished peoples eager for modernity’s allurements. Almost everyone everywhere wants all the things they have heard about, seen, or experienced via the new technologies”.

These assertions would suggest that, over the past 50 years, western individualistic traits, such as power and achievement, would have made inroads into the core collective value system of consumers in developing nations, including India. Evidence suggests, however, that this has not been the case, at least not before 2004. Indeed, core values in India have remained fairly stable from the 1980s until the early 2000s. As an example, the individualism score for India was 48, according to Hofstede’s cultural value score in 1980, and 46 in 2004 (Ghemawat and Reiche, 2011; Hofstede 2015). This would suggest that one-way mass media while encouraging Indians to adopt western products, had little influence on changing core values.

However, as we will demonstrate in this paper, all this changed since the advent of the internet and, more recently, social media. The high-involvement, interactive nature of the internet has had a profound impact on the values of Indian youth. Online platforms, such as those afforded by social media, facilitate a high-involvement, interactive exchange of views between people around the world resulting in a true exchange of ideals and values and, in the process, impact the value system of Indian youth. While existing research on human values suggests that, barring a catastrophic event, core values in a society are slow to change (e.g., Rokeach 1968), we show that, in recent years, the internet has been the catalyst for rapid change of values among youth in India.

Specifically, we address the question of how the Internet is changing the values of youth in India. Does the amount of time spent on the Internet affect the rate of change of a person’s values? If so, which values change, and which do not? How quickly have these values changed? These questions are noteworthy, both from managerial and academic perspectives. Since consumers buy products that reflect their values, a noteworthy change in core values of society will have a significant impact on the products demanded and, commensurately, on the most effective ways to market them. Academically, newer concepts and theories will evolve, potentially
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