

# Youths in the Consumption Culture

## Abstract

Recent trend in the splurge of commodities in the market is leading to a new pattern of excessive consumption among the youths. whether driven by the instinct to acquire products out of curiosity or to satisfy basic or luxurious necessity is a question to ponder over. Incessant consumption is a means to procure the ends of the market economy. Surfacing of inequality and differences among the youths and changes in their behavioral pattern is a result of consumer culture portrayed by media and market. Symbolic interaction takes a different form displaying proclaimed self-esteem and prestige by dint of demonstrating family wealth.

**Keywords:** Youth, Media, Consumer Culture, Conspicuous Consumption.

### Introduction

The paper is an attempt to shed light on the consumption habit of the youths largely motivated by media and market resulting in changed in behavioral pattern. In matter of commodity production and consumer culture which is now targeting to influence the younger generation finds perfect place in the words of Marx and Engels which says that the satisfaction of our needs lead to the creation of new needs and that is how the capitalistic motive of consumer markets are fulfilled with creation of commodities for consumers and simultaneously garnering profit for the producers or owners of market. To add, a desire may be inherent in human nature to display or flaunt the belongings that they possess and to consume anything that surfaces in the market. More than adults, the youths take up a quick habit of spending spree and embracing a consumerist culture in a bid to keep oneself afloat in the latest trend and time. According to Arnold and Thompson, 2005, consumer culture denotes a social arrangement in which relations between lived culture and social resources and between meaningful ways of life and the symbolic and material resources, on which they depend, are mediated through markets. Thus, variations are bound to be seen in the lifestyle and interaction process of the younger generation because of conspicuous consumption which satisfies both material needs as well as social needs like prestige and status.

### Importance of the Problem

With new markets on the rise and newer products in the market, a tendency among the youth is developed to satisfy their wants. A dynamic relation is shared by the marketplace and youth consumer action which ultimately helps the market to produce innovations. Newness and attractions lure the youth for conspicuous consumption to heighten their social prestige among their age groups. Traditional ways and local cultural patterns tend to diminish in the wake of globalization. Thus, the youth portray changes in attitude and behavior which become a cause of study and concern.

### Objective of the study

The present study attempts to understand consumer culture of the youths which involves conspicuous consumption and changes in the way of lifestyle of the youth.

1. To study the emergence of consumer culture
2. To understand the impact of globalization on youth in conspicuous consumption
3. To analyze the role of media in shaping the attitude and behavior of youth

### Review of Literature

Eric J. Arnold and Craig J. Thompson in their study "Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty Years of Research" has opined that there is a combination of the socio-cultural, symbolic and ideological aspects of consumption.



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Mark Paterson in his study "Consumption and Everyday Life" opine that there have been major changes in the life of people due to globalization, new information technologies, privatization of public resources and the dominance of consumerist values. He examines the pleasures of shopping and the routine association with consumerism.

Steven Miles in his study "Youth lifestyles in a changing world" analyzes the ways in which young lives are changing with time and the relationship they share with media and consumption thereby constructing their own identities.

#### **Research Design**

The research has been carried with the help of secondary data i.e. with the aid of literature review to get an insight on the youth, their consumption pattern and the notable changes being brought about.

#### **Analysis and Discussion**

Although consumer culture is a recent development, yet it has succeeded in penetrating into the lives of the people. Tracing back to pre-modern society, it was marked by traditionalism and societies marked by relatively little change (Koppl, 1996). Pre-modern times saw individuals in search of basic needs where product or material pursuits weren't a priority. The commodities in those times played a utilitarian role or that was useful was pursued, used and saved for further use. Subsistence living was a priority with minimum possession and focus was firm on maintaining relationship either with family or God.

With the advent of Industrial Revolution from 1960, modernism arose bringing fundamental changes in the lives of the people. Importance of the agrarian system started losing its significance with more people from the rural areas migrating to urban belts. New hopes and dreams for personal achievement saw the onset with patterns of consumption and acquisition of products. And as Cooley (1902), stated that consumption activities aided in developing oneself for personal presentation. Thus, the shift of desire from fulfilling physical needs to consume products for self-presentation is the rise of consumer culture.

The post-modern world saw an unprecedented desire to consume products by purchasing for self-development. With burgeoning growth of market and production, consumption patterns have become a conspicuous symbol of luxury more than necessity. Materialism started becoming the driving force of post-modern culture of living. Individuals have learnt to adjust to multiple roles and consume symbols of luxury or necessity whenever situation demands and permits. Utilitarian quality has served meaningless in the post-modern world instead emphasis has been laid on providing horizons and commodities to construct personal image and representation. Therefore, Holt (2002) said that consumption becomes the defining feature of post-modern societies and consumer culture reigns supreme.

Youth market too did not evolve overnight. Evidence suggest that prior to Second World War, there was a rise of attraction of consumer culture. David Fowler (1995) charts the rise of the teenage

consumer in inter-war Britain. He argues that young people experienced a higher standard of living than the rest of the family, even among working class families experiencing poverty. Fowler identified a distinctive teenage culture based on the access to commercialized leisure and the conspicuous consumption of leisure-based products and services in British towns and cities.

With the ongoing phenomena of globalization and the advent of modern lifestyle penetrating into the developing minds of the younger generation, the cult of constant pursuit of commodities or imitating the updated lifestyle of the paparazzi is on the rise. Be it the material or non-material culture, accumulation of goods and services above the desired level is high among the youths. The global connection of the market economy and easy availability of products both at minimum and maximum pricing, focus has been shifted from the needful to the level of comfort accomplishment in the youth. The urge among the youths to manifest one's improved social identity and enhance lifestyle goals is provided by the marketplace with ample choices of miscellaneous resources and commodities. Thorstein Veblen (1994) developed an evolutionary framework of conspicuous consumption in which preferences are determined socially in relation to the positions of individuals in the social hierarchy in contrast to the neo-classical approach which focus on individual's static maximization of utility according to exogeneous preferences.

As globalization is creating an explosion of products and images from which to choose from young consumers and as modernist identity projects of unity and progress break down, one is left with questions of how young consumers construct meaningful identities and how strategies of identity may be evoked as lifestyle and sub-culture fragment (Firat, 1995, Firat & Schutz, 1997). Consumption has become one of the dominant practices among the youths which sought to make them materialistic thereby addressing their ever-imaginative fantasies of luxury and sophistication. More products in the globalized market encourage the youths towards false needs and more experiences of things and commodities. With advancement of market and people having more money to spend, the younger generation too is not an exception. While youths engaging in work to earn in some cases is laudable, yet the habit of spending without limit once developed, is difficult to shed off later.

Globalization has in fact given a platform to define the taste of products and sense of style and class which the youths largely follow in forming sub-cultures. Youths may seem to be specific while buying essentials and necessities because it projects who they are when they buy or consume. Researchers have explored how consumers use conspicuous brands in their life and how they display their personality and status through brand image (Chao and Schor, 1998; Langer, 1997). The youth segment feels the need to communicate with others through the consumption patterns. Wong (1997) feels that with conspicuous consumption, product satisfaction is derived from audience reaction rather than utility in

use. It thus calls to ponder over the identification of negative impact due to globalization. Marginalization of groups and communities take place as one group has the capacity to earn more and give their younger ones more than required while another receives scanty. With more prestige needs flooding the market, economy is booming and drawing a grotesque division among various strata of people. The pleasure of shopping is fulfilled in the routine of consumption by the youth which again bring differences among the youths.

Acts of consumption by youths may seem trivial and normal when compared to the global marketing and advertising agencies. Yet consumption seems to be important to youth. Mass media is playing a vital role in influencing the young generation to construct their lives and live in an individualized world. Media and youth share a relation where the youth try to favor whatever the media has to offer in terms of consuming new products and media tries to control the nature of youth lifestyle. In some cases, the youth simply shape the meaning of usefulness and uselessness of commodities displayed in media and at other instance, youth consumption pattern simply become a product of a global power capitalist system. Media construct the experience of youth thereby indicating the need to see and bring changes in the social life of youth.

Consumers may fall in two categories of one group being rational enough to consume products according to their social group identity, taste and thereby using, misusing or displaying commodities while the other consumer group may simply get into the cult of buying and displaying simply being instigated by the mass media. Youths falling in any of the category of consumers can be easily preyed into more consumption. Youths are a soft target for the advertising agency to lure and manipulate into consumption of more goods for the larger benefit of revitalizing the economy. Exposure to products that haven't been tried by youths, media attempts to influence youths by tying them up to commodities through displays on media. Nava and Nava (1990) suggest that young people are in fact very discriminating consumers of advertising and that they consume commercials as cultural products in themselves rather than simply as vehicles for selling. The market place serves as a visible manifestation of the relationship of youth and dominant culture.

Media delivers both positive and negative impacts on the younger generation. On the positive side, youth learn to accumulate knowledge on various culture and environment and applying the same for growth and progress. While the negative consequence compel youth to be passive observers and recipients of the changes in the lifestyle thereby detaching them from the moral fabric of the society.

Angela McRobbie (1993) points out that youth represents a major symbolic investment for society as a whole and for this reason the richness of young people's experience needs to be addressed in a far more sophisticated manner than is currently the case. Patterns of consumption determine social stratification as recognized by Max Weber who

observed that status groups are stratified according to their consumption goods.

Despite some youths being economic dependents on parents and adults, they are thrown into the web of market machinations and product consumption thus generating a feeling of wanting more than the more. With growth of consumer led marketing, specially targeting younger generations, a new culture of modern world is being shaped with rise of conditions like inequality, stratification, ideology of choosing among varieties and gratifying consumerist instinct. Not all household has the capacity to provide their wards with the luxurious items of consumption. This creates a gap or difference among the youth. While some can use and flaunt excess commodities of need, a certain section would not be able to.

Media is a persuasive communication and so do the media contents seem deceptive. The youth segment seems to alienate themselves from social circles and engross themselves in possession of products either through impulsive buying or when adults bombard them with more of their needs and luxury. Probable alienation might occur from youths' innate qualities and creativity with too much indulgence in readymade goods and services. Mass media outlets and communication channels inspire youth to focus on wants more than needs, to purchase products to live better and prove their taste and status. Media sends a message indicating the need to indulge in abundance of things and that deprivation of anything we desire is negative and non-desirable. The formation of attitude of such kind may result in consequent pauperization at some point in time due to excessive investment in pursuing more and little plan on saving. This is detrimental to the youth. It is difficult to avoid the temptation of conspicuous consumption within peer groups as one group shall continue to purchase and display. Thus, one peer group becomes the reference group for another peer group or individual in the pursuit of commodities.

#### **Suggestion and conclusion**

The growth of consumer culture among the youth would go on with time and so shall the ideologies of youth to reject ways and patterns of the generation that was before them and set an identity with what they are associated with now. With an array of choice over products and commodities, youth give adequate attention to mass media and loses the way to make a sense of the media portrayals.

Family structure plays a greater role in shaping the identity formation of youth and rescuing them from conflicting situations of tension and depression. Elders shoulder the responsibility to help youth develop media literacy skills and identify the messages that media ought to deliver. Alienation from socialization process could be prevented when younger generation are made accustomed to tradition and cultural ways and practices of living. Cultural disintegration will lead to loss of family structure and losing a person's self-esteem. Thus, diminishing values could be restored through proper assimilation of youth, adults and the issues cropping up from consumption behavior. An attitude for nominal and

useful necessities could be developed in the youths and help them to differentiate between need and wants.

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