

# **Tensions between Consumerist and Traditional Values: Intergenerational Dynamics**

Chandrasekara, M.R.  
Department of Marketing  
Faculty of Management and Finance  
University of Colombo  
ruwangic@mkt.cmb.ac.lk  
rungsc@gmail.com

## **Introduction**

In a consumer culture, consumers “avidly desire goods and services that are valued for non-utilitarian reasons such as status seeking, envy provocation, and novelty seeking” (Belk, 1988b, 105). Consumerism first emerged in Western civilization as a natural part of its historical development (Slater, 1997), but has now become an integral global phenomenon (Alden, Steenkamp & Batra, 1999). However, it does not manifest across the entire globe in the same manner as many societies differ markedly from each other (Ger & Belk, 1996a; Gosh, 2011; Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012). When societies that are deeply rooted in their own traditional religious cultural values also adopt consumerist values, tensions arise between the two value systems (Ger & Belk, 1996a; Mathur, 2010; Wijetunga, 2014).

## **Research Problem**

Even though literature acknowledges the existence of tension, current empirical studies are limited to mere descriptions of tension (for e.g. Eckhardt & Mahi, 2012; van Wessel, 2004) with no theoretical explanation provided on *how* tension emerges in individual consumers due to this clash of values. This study explores the dynamics of tension between parents and children, when parents attempt to transfer their traditional cultural values to their dependent children who are active participants of the consumer culture. This study takes an identity approach because both traditional ideologies and consumerist ideologies are seen to shape individual identities of people (Fernandes, 2006).

## **Objectives**

Accordingly this study discusses the inter-relations between parent and child with regard to traditional and consumerist values and how these relationships affect their identity and lead to possible tensions. It discusses how the consumerist behavior of children play a role in shaping their parents' identities. Furthermore, it addresses the identity construction of children along with the possible tensions experienced by the child due to the interplay of traditional and consumerist values.

## **Theoretical Underpinning**

Primarily, this study utilizes the Self Discrepancy theory which provides a framework to explore how people subjectively interpret themselves and how conflicting values relating

to different self-states can lead to a state of tension (Higgins, 1987). In addition, in examining the tension experienced by parents due to their children's behaviour, the notion of Belk (1988a) that possessions contribute heavily to construction of people's identities is also used. This idea is useful because the theory of Self-Discrepancy is limited to the explanation of discrepancies between an individual's own self-states; however, based on the premise that children can be regarded as a parent's possession (Dreyden, 1979, Lifton, 1973), Belk's idea that possessions contribute to identity explains how dependent children's behaviours could influence parents' identities. Therefore, together with the self-discrepancy theory, this concept helps explore how the interplay of traditional and consumerist values in the behaviour of children influences the identity tensions of parents.

## **Methodology**

The study uses an interpretive qualitative approach, with the unit of analysis being the individual consumer. The Sinhalese-Buddhist middle class was selected as a suitable site to explore the phenomenon.

Sample selection was based on a sociological classification of the Sri Lankan consumer market by Liyanage (2009) and 40 in-depth semi structured interviews were conducted to collect data from two consumer segments: One was Traditional Middle Class 2 (TMC 2), a group that is exposed to the contemporary consumerist culture, while also being strongly bound by traditional cultural values; the other was a contrasting consumer group, New Urban Middle Class (NUMC) with a relatively higher disposition towards Westernization and consumerism with no strong roots in traditional values (Liyanage, 2009). The sample comprised 23 parents and 17 (dependent) children of both groups. .

## **Findings, Conclusions, Implications**

### **Parent Child Dynamics of TMC 2**

The findings show that the interplay of traditional and consumerist values in the construction of the TMC 2 consumer's identity affect how they raise children. While traditional religious cultural values represent an obligatory sense of self (ought self, Higgins, 1987), consumerist values act more as an inspirational identity for TMC 2 (ideal self, Higgins, 1987).

It is evident that TMC 2 parents use children as an extension of their own self (Belk, 1988a) and that they try to see to their own identity through the child. Here it was seen that older TMC 2 parents (above 50 years) were predominantly traditional and the younger TMC 2 parents (35 – 50 years) had a more balanced mix of traditional and consumerist values. Both these groups simultaneously wish to see their children embrace religious cultural traditions while being a part of the consumer culture. Consequently a tension is experienced by TMC 2 parents when they see the children's lack of interest and effort to follow traditional values (where the intensity of tension was found to be higher for daughters). This also agrees with Belk's (1988a) notion that there is a sense of self-loss when the child is not available as an extension of self. This parent group also appears to be under pressure of wanting to facilitate the consumerist expectations of the child. This is because TMC 2 parents identify with and accept the values of the consumer culture and desire to see their children being a part of the same. Tensions were expressed through

emotions such as feeling sad, anxious and scared (for the child's future) towards their loss of traditional values as well as feelings of guilt towards controlling the child's consumerist engagement.

Even though the TMC2 children too, appear to embrace both consumerist and traditional values, they identify more with consumerist values and less with tradition; being pushed by their parents towards traditional values, thus creates a tension for the TMC 2 child. Furthermore, their perception of traditional values are different to that of their parents, as these children are reluctant to blindly accept traditional ways of doing things (for e.g. religious, cultural traditions). Thus, while consumerism is embraced enthusiastically as a personal desire, their traditional identity comes due to an obligatory sense as a form of obeying their parents. This clash between modern aspirations and traditional obligations create a tension for them, resulting in negative emotions such as anger, frustration, irritation and worry.

### **Parent-child Dynamics of NUMC**

Unlike the TMC 2 consumer, the NUMC consumer's (25-45 years) identity is predominantly a consumerist one. Even though this Sinhalese Buddhist group practice traditions at a reasonable level (e.g. celebrating cultural festivals, visiting the temple, undertaking almsgivings, etc.), it is observed that they do not embrace traditional values very strongly as a compulsory element of their identity. As a result NUMC children grow up in a highly materialistic household with considerable access to monetary wealth while traditional values are not given a significant place. Alternatively, a form of secular morality appears to be practised by these children where they abide by a set of moral principles which lie outside of religious traditions.

Here, the child is not regarded as tightly fused to the parent's identity as for TMC 2. Rather, the child is considered by the parent more as a separate individual who has an independent set of values and attitudes and thus their own identity. This means that the NUMC parent does not go to great lengths to implant their own values in their children. Consequently, there is no tension experienced by the NUMC parents, with regard to their children.

The identity of NUMC children too, is predominantly consumerist. Moreover, the high income / wealth factor makes them take their consumerist lifestyle for granted from a young age. As there is only the forward movement that looks forward to a consumerist life (ideal self, Higgins, 1987), and no backward pull of traditional boundaries (ought self, Higgins, 1987), NUMC children, like their parents, experience no tension.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion it can be stated that while TMC 2 parents consider children as an extension of their own identity, the NUMC consumer tends to regard the child more as a separate entity from their own self. Due to this reason, TMC 2 parents try to inculcate traditional values in children and also pass on some consumerist values that they themselves desire (Vicarious consumption through dependents, Veblen, 1899). In addition to these consumerist values the children get from parents, they are also exposed to such values from the external world, which makes them more consumerist. Seeing a lower level of

traditional identity in children creates a tension for TMC 2 parents, while also being under pressure to facilitate the child's consumerist desires. For children, who are being pulled in two directions (but with consumerism acting as a stronger force), a tension is experienced when parents attempt to make them more traditional.

As a contrasting group, the NUMC consumer who has a predominantly consumerist identity, does not appear to use the child as a major extension of their self. Since they are not deeply rooted in tradition as the TMC 2 consumer, there is no attempt to inculcate the same in the child. The NUMC child too, has no obligation towards maintaining traditions and continues to lead the consumerist lifestyle they desire. As a result, both the NUMC parent and the child do not experience a conflict between values.

The identification of subtle differences in the tensions experienced by consumers in attempting to manage traditional and consumerist values, enables marketers to tailor their offers to the different kinds and levels of cultural tension felt by consumers. Also, the changes in the level of influence exerted by parents over children's identity in the two groups implies the necessity of targeting children of different groups with different marketing approaches.

**Keywords:** Consumer Culture; Cultural Tensions; Identity; Parent-Child Dynamics; Traditional Values

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