

Consumer Culture: An Analysis in a Socio - Cultural and Political Frame

Fauzia Saleem Alvi

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Muhammad Hafeez

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Riffat Munawar

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Abstract

Consumer culture, an imperative tool of globalization has influenced societies world over. The phenomenon became popularized in the beginning of twentieth century constructing the structure of 'modern capitalism'. Today no society remains untouched from its influence. However a significant variation is seen among different regions, in absorption of 'consumerism' due to their specific socio-cultural and political frame. Consumer culture has dominated the West by its values of 'materialism' and 'individualism'. The diverse manifestation of traditional collectivism remains a significant aspect of the South and East Asian region. Pakistani society due to its specific socio-cultural and political frame depicts similar patterns of the influence of consumer culture.

Keywords: Consumer culture, globalization, materialism, individualism, collectivism.

Introduction

Today the world is rapidly being molded into a shared social space by economic, political and technological forces. Development in one region of the world can have profound consequences for the life chances of individuals or communities on the other side of the globe. Consumer culture, a vital tool of globalization, is seen as a strong force responsible for creating interconnectivity across regions, although, the influence varies from one region to another depending upon the specific socio-cultural and political frame. The present paper aims to explain the different dimensions of the influence of consumer culture. Furthermore it tries to explore some dimensions of this influence in context of Pakistani society. The data used is a compilation of both primary as well as secondary nature.

Consumption as a 'Culture'

Consumption has played a central role in modern capitalism and contemporary culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century consumption was a decisive force in constructing modern capitalism, forming its dynamics and social structure. This was the period when

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'consumerism' dominated the West as a culture and began to influence individual identities, values and knowledge of the general public. Material products like clothing and household items started to become a symbol of social and individual identity (Trentmann, 2004).

In literature the concepts of 'consumerism', 'consumer society', 'consumer behavior', 'consumer culture' and 'consumer regimes', are often treated as synonymous. In the late 1970's and early 1980's, two theoretical approaches of studying consumer culture became popular. The first approach saw the birth of a modern consumer society in the 17th and 18th century in the Western Europe and across the Atlantic world, based on a view of modernity as acquiring novel and unique artisans. The other approach which emerged in the late 19th century focused on the view of mass consumption, primarily as a result of the emergence of 'departmental stores'. It shifted society from a need based approach to a system of ever-expanding goods and desires (Trentmann, 2004).

Influence of Consumer Culture in the Western World

In the Western world (including countries like USA, UK, France, Germany, Belgium etc) the influence of consumer culture has been more of a material nature. According to Stearns (1997) the Western European region is responsible for introducing the global values of 'the lure of material goods' or the 'acquisitive individualist mentality'. As a result, a society is created in which many people formulate their goals in life partly through acquiring goods that they clearly do not need for subsistence. Moreover, acquiring material items is not important rather it is 'the act' or 'the desire to act to acquire more', which partly constructs one's life goals. However, according to Trentmann (2004), in normative discourse, the role of family bonding, social relationships as well as social class cannot be ignored in developing a comprehensive understanding of the influence of consumer culture. For example, acquiring a new car may not be limited only to an acquisitive individualistic attitude, rather factors like family needs, social class or social responsibilities may have an important role to play in the purchase too.

Consumer culture has been placed responsible, for influencing political psyche also and shifting the political sentiments of peoples from one frame to another. In the political history of the USA, the attitudes and behavior of people about different countries have been molded through 'political consumerism'. For example, in 2003, when the French government along with governments of Germany, Belgium and Russia, firmly opposed the approval of a UN Security Council resolution allowing the use of military force against Iraq, the USA government did not react positively. No street demonstrations or official protests occurred. Instead, a number of US restaurants stopped offering 'French wine'; various shops decided not to sell 'French cheese' and some food-outlets even changed the names of 'French fries' as 'Freedom fries', just to show their political hostility (Stolle, Hooghe & Micheletti, 2005).

According to Wolfe (1989) and Putman (2000), in UK, commercialism and privatization of TV channels have decreased the feeling of solidarity and sense of belongingness (level of collectivism) within communities. A further role in this direction has been played by the privatization of basic institutions and facilities like hospitals,

schools, postal services, transportation system, prisons etc. This 'privatization' of the 'public sphere' has also decreased the effectiveness of democratic control over people (Habermas, 1992; Sennett, 1977; Nader, 2000; Sheller & Urry, 2003). The reason being, that the facilities which were meant for public use, are now being controlled by 'private agencies' for their benefit, thus damaging the basic spirit behind public property.

Focusing on how inter-personal relations are being affected by the influence of consumer culture. Flouri (2007) explains his work in context of parent-child relationship. The acquisitive individualist mentality of the consumer culture introduces materialism, which measures relationship in context of their 'use value'. Flouri (2007) collected data from 1091 British mothers and fathers of secondary school age children. The research showed that due to the influence of consumer culture, materialism was increasing among the British urban families and a strong positive relationship between materialism and parenting stress, inter-parental conflict regarding children's academic performance and psychological stress among individual parents was observed. Moreover, in another study Flouri (1999) showed that materialism in adolescents had a positive relationship with peer influence and religious service attendance where as it had a negative relationship with 'one's mother's religious service attendance' and 'economic socialization'. The data were collected from British adolescents and their mothers. Bowe, Ball & Gewirtz (1994) in their study also highlighted that in United Kingdom the schooling had rapidly become a consumer industry, which has influenced parents as well as school administrations as 'consumers' and 'producers' respectively, highlighting the growing acquisitive individualistic mentality.

Easterlin & Crimmins (1991) studied how during the 1970's and the late 1980's, consumer culture had increased private materialism among the American youth. They started opting for jobs which paid better and were status oriented, rather than jobs that provided opportunities for self-fulfillment or public service. Furthermore, the feelings of economic insecurity increased among the youth and shifted towards traditional political beliefs. The study attributes the reason of this shift of values to the transmission of the adult's values to their younger generation, who had experienced post 1973 economic deprivation in America. The article further explains that in the 1990's these values were again reversed. La Barbera and Gurhan (1998) found that the subjective well-being of a person has a positive correlation with low religiosity and a higher level of materialism.

Consumer Culture and the Asian Societies

Consumer culture introduced modernization, urbanization and mass communication in the Asian region; however its influence varied from region to region depending upon the specific socio-cultural and political frame of the culture. In case of consumerism influencing political psyche, the resentment shown towards the consumer culture of "MacDonald", "American music and fashion trends" in parts of the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, is infact a reflection of their disapproval towards the corruption of the authoritarian regimes in these societies, which are assumed to be backed by the western and American policies. On the other hand, contrary to this, in the other societies of the world

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material consumerism is taken to be a 'natural' and unavoidable process of globalization (Lieber & Weisberg, 2002).

According to Pais (2006) in Indian society, due to the influence of consumer culture, the urban youth is experiencing 'identity confusion', whereby on one side they remain attached to their traditional local culture of preferring arranged marriages, respecting and obeying their parents and taking care of the older members of family, thus strengthening the family bond. On the other side, being a part of the technological world by using internet and TV satellite channels, the Indian youth is lured towards the 'acquisitive individualistic mentality'.

Stanley (2001) in his study highlights another aspect of the influence of consumer culture on the young people living in Asia and parts of other developing countries. According to him under the influence of this culture people's life styles have also been influenced as a result of which there are rising cases of low birth weights, asthma, type I diabetes, child abuse, suicide, obesity, eating disorders, learning disabilities, behavioural disorders, violence, school drop-outs, illicit drugs, alcohol use and juvenile crimes. Although Stanley has discussed various factors responsible for these problems but broadly he views the incompatibility of the Asian youth in adjusting with the fast culture introduced through the consumer culture.

According to Fay (2005), in South Korea's 2002 Presidential Elections, a major contributor in Mr. Roh Moo Hyun's landslide victory was the high use of mobile phones and internet by the young population belonging to the cohort of 20-39 years.

Oudshoorn and Pinch (2004) in their book '*How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*' explain how the role and psyche of the 'consumer' are important in understanding consumer culture. Their book addresses the philosophical debates, concerning 'developing a bridge between technology studies', 'feminist perspective in culture and media' as well as the practical side of people continuing the use of certain obsolete technologies. Their work also takes the reader into the consumer world related to health services, where the cost of using a technology becomes important for both the state (the provider) and the public (the consumer).

Studying materialism among Chinese children in Hong Kong, Chan (2003) found that younger children were more materialistic than older children, although no significant gender difference was found in having materialistic values. The findings further revealed that greater exposure to TV programs and advertisements did not contribute towards increasing materialism among young children.

The discussed literature shows that consumer culture is a powerful force in influencing societies world over. Local cultures, political choices, inter-personal relations and individual attitudes towards social life have reshaped due to consumer culture. Moreover the materialistic values have taken over many aspects of human life.

Pakistani Society and Consumer Culture

The Pakistani society is basically a traditional society having a strong influence of family normative structure. The traditional family institution presents a tightly interwoven and

interlocked structure, defining individual social identity and individual attitudes. There is a strong and pervasive orientation towards family life and values, which results in developing strong family ties based on moral, material and emotional support. There is great complexity when we look at domestic relationships, which vary across the country, influenced by factors such as class, caste, region, ethnicity and even place of residence (Donnan, 1997). Apparently, a Pakistani (family) household appears to be a “bastion of traditionalism” which remains unchanged (ibid).

The present section of the paper explains how consumer culture has influenced the youth of Pakistan in context of their family life. For this purpose a survey was conducted within the Punjab University and 600 young respondents belonging to the age group of 20-24 years filled a self-administered questionnaire. They were all post-graduate students belonging to Punjab province (70.0 percent), the Khyber Pakhtunkhawa (28.5 percent), Azad Jammu and Kashmir (approx 8.0 percent) and about two percent of respondents were from the Sindh province. Youth is an important segment for research as presently almost 65 percent of Pakistan’s population comprises of young population. Moreover youth being a relatively more active segment of society as compared to the rest of the population, is highly vulnerable to the influence of consumer culture. To have a broader picture on the phenomenon in-depth interviews of parents were also conducted.

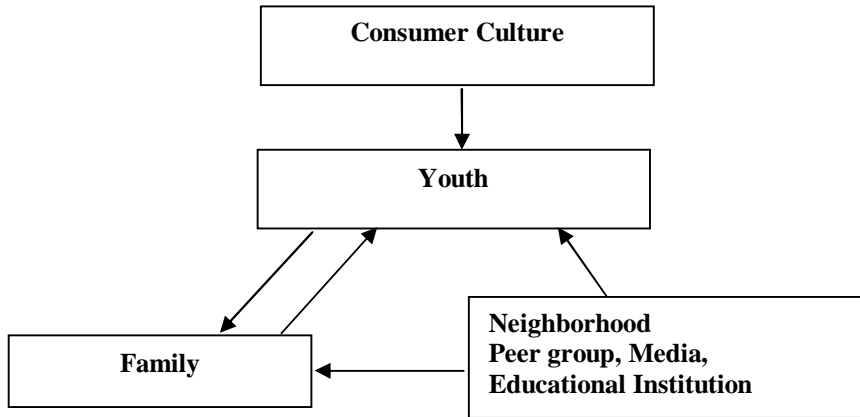
Influence of Consumer Culture on Pakistani Youth

A ‘*two-pronged approach*’ is developed to explain the influence of consumer culture on youth (shown in figure 1.1 given on pg. 9). The first approach explains the direct influence of families on youth. Here a direct, deliberate and mostly conscious socialization of children/youth take place based on ‘parent-child relationship’, and from the social environment of the family which may include grandparents, uncles, aunts and elder siblings. The family inculcates the social values, customs and norms of society, which may have the influence of consumer culture.

The second approach explains the indirect influence of consumer culture on youth through the agents of society, such as the peer group, neighborhood, mass media and the educational institution. The role of educational institutions are vital, since the young individuals have a more personal and somewhat intimate relationship with close friends and teachers, as compared to other agents of society. Along with this, the curriculum taught and the literature used, played an important role in developing ‘human software’, which determine the values and attitudes developed by youth towards life.

Figure 1.1

Neighborhoods are a symbol of ‘we-group’ in societies and have an influence on individual attitudes and behaviors. In a globalized world, media has played a significant role in connecting people with the global culture. The fashions, the



trends and the major social and political events taking place in one part of the globe are instantly communicated to the rest of the world through internet and satellite channels. Studies have shown that youth are the most influenced population by this element, as their minds are more receptive to change as compared to other segments of society. Moreover through the media, consumer culture has created '*bicultural identities*' and '*hybrid identities*', especially among the youth of the developed countries. J.J. Arnett (2005) introduced the term '*bicultural identities*', in which youth develop two identities while living in a society influenced by globalization through its dominant tool of consumer culture. The first identity is a result of the 'local' experiences with the family, community and the local tradition, while the second is a result of global experiences through the use of the modern communication technology (such as internet and cable/satellite television). According to Arnett, due to globalization, change is also being experienced in local cultures as apparent in the changing traditional cultural beliefs and practices. This is creating a '*hybrid identity*' among youth, resulting in a blend of local cultures and the elements of a (Western) global system/culture.

The influence of consumer culture on youth has been measured using different indicators like the 'use of modern communication technology' (MCT which includes the use of phones/internet/cable TV), 'its influence on purchasing behavior' and the 'overall influence of it on the attitudes of the respondents'. Some important findings of the study are as follows;

Use of Modern Communication Technology

A gradual influence of consumer culture was visible among Pakistani youth. The use of modern communication technology (MCT) has increased significantly. This has happened due to the liberal policies pursued during 1999-2008 (President Musharraf's era) whereby electronic media grew rapidly. The cell phone industry also received an impetus during the same period, and contributed towards increasing the influence of consumer culture. The use of MCT was more common among youth as compared to their older generation. The use of cable and satellite TV was more or less the same between the two generations, but youth

used internet and cell phone facilities to a much larger extent than the older people. Some of the mothers did not even know how to operate a computer on their own and the fathers' use was limited to their office work. The average use of MCT by respondents was two hours a day. This shows that the MCT use remains relatively low in Pakistan as compared to some other countries. For example the MCT use among urban Malaysian youth was 5 to 10 hours a day on average (Ramli,2005).

Females respondents reported using internet for 'latest fashion trends', 'advertisements' and scholarly research related to their own discipline of studies. Boys were more interested in web searching regarding national as well as international sports and its related news.

Regarding the level of 'social connection' (the extent to which individuals have a sense of community in their neighborhood, among friends and family members) prevalent among youth, MCT was preferred over face to face meetings. A similar trend was seen among the parents. The use of MCT was greater among boys as compared to girls, although the MCT use was gradually increasing among the females as well.

Visiting neighborhoods is becoming a rare practice among youth. The trend of visiting neighborhoods has also decreased among the older generation, as MCT has helped to establish communication with people without their physical presence and produced a deficit in family. Both parents and youth were of the view that the use of MCT had made their lives easier and reduced stress, although the women showed a higher level of trust regarding the information they received from close friends or relatives as compared to the one they got from print/electronic media.

ii- Influence of Use of MCT on Consumer Behavior

Consumerism has numerous consequences for youth cultures. In the surveyed sample, more than one- half of the young respondents reported that their buying behavior was influenced by media. Overall the commercials of mobile phone service companies were the most favored by youth.

a) Buying Branded/Foreign Products

Buying branded or foreign products are becoming popular among the Pakistani youth and they attributed this change to the influx of cable/satellite TV channels. Moreover, this element made youth feel a part of the 'global world' with upward social mobility. However, some people opined that buying foreign goods were a form of disloyalty to their own country and religion. This shows that due to globalization, consumerism has increased in Pakistan; and it is responsible for associating with '*self-selected cultures*', while some other people try to re-discover their original identities in religion or nationalism.

b) Beliefs and Practices of Religion

Regarding the influence of consumer culture on individual attitudes and behaviors another very important aspect is the beliefs and practices of religion. There have been many theorists like Turner (2008), Durkheim (in Macionis, 2005) and Weber (in

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Haralambos, 1991), who view religion as a construct of society controlling the human society and physical structures. However it is argued that with increased industrialization in societies the influence of religion will reduce. Rationalization will erode religious influence and people's attitudes and behaviours will more be influenced by material gains (ibid).

According to Durkheim, religion is a construct of social reality, structured on the 'sacred' (the extraordinary, inspiring, awe and reverence) and 'profane' (ordinary elements of everyday life) (Macdonis, 2005). Religion is founded on the 'sacred', embodied in rituals and customs. The 'profane' provides understanding of the meanings of 'sacred' (ibid). Rituals and customs transcend individual life experiences on the basis of their faith (ibid). Durkheim places society as 'sacred'; maintain social order by expressing and reinforcing the sentiments or values which develop the 'collective conscience' (Haralambos & Holborn, 1991).

Turner (2008) in his book *The Ritual Process: Structure & Anti-Structure*, views religion in a more holistic frame; where at macro level religion is a "grotesque reflection" of the economic, political and social relationships in society and at micro level it presents a picture of how people think, feel and act in accordance with their relationship to their social and natural environments. Thus, Turner in a different frame again views society being the religion which regulates human behavior and beliefs, through customs and rituals.

According to Arnett (2005), consumer culture, a tool of globalization, has influenced the beliefs and practices of religion among youth in different ways. Under its influence in some regions of the world, youth has reverted towards religion creating 'self-selected cultures' (meaning emergence of societies having rejection towards global values and having strong adherence towards traditional religious beliefs). For example Kaufman (1991) studies the self-selected cultures among the Jewish communities settled in USA. She explains that young Jewish girls who have spent their childhood and early youth in a totally liberal US environment, have chosen to go back to traditional Orthodox Judaism, which although enforces strict gender segregation, yet it gives them a clear meaning of life in this world. They show their dislike for the 'superficial' and 'temporary' material status attained in this world. Similar to this many fundamentalist Jewish movements have also been observed in both Western and non-Western societies (Marty & Appleby, 1993). In other cases, according to Arnett (2005), because of the global media, free-market economics, democratic institution, increased length of formal schooling, delayed marriages and parenthood, youth have diverted away from their traditional religious culture, developing 'hybrid identity' (meaning having dual identity by absorbing the effects of the global culture introduced through consumer culture and also retaining their own local culture).

Pakistan is a society based on "religious socialization mechanism" (Stolz, 2009), where religion is used to regulate the behavior and influence the attitudes of people. Two aspects related to the study of influence of consumer culture on beliefs and practices of religion were taken; firstly the prevalent religious rituals and customs; secondly, their influence on attitudes. In the surveyed sample almost all the respondents (98.2 percent males and 99.3 percent females) shared the same religion with their parents. Virtually all the respondents (98.6 percent) were Muslims, where as a fraction of them were Christians (0.7 percent), Hindus (0.3 percent), and Buddhist (0.2 percent) and Atheist (0.2 percent).

Practicing religious rituals were measured by asking certain questions about ‘saying prayers’, ‘fasting’ and ‘reciting the Holy Quran’ (i.e the holy book of Muslims). Saying prayers ‘five times a day’ (called “Salaat”) is obligatory for all Muslims. The study showed that consumer culture did not influence much in the different practices of religion. There was a very small percentage (only 9.2 percent) of respondents who say their prayers occasionally (only on Eid days or on Fridays). There were both mothers and fathers who said their prayers five times a day and also advised their family members to do the same. Similarly reciting the Holy Quran was taken as a ritual which showed one’s respect and emotional attachment to one’s religion. A substantially large percentage (97.6 percent) of young respondents followed the practice of reciting the Holy Quran. Among parents, the practice of reciting the Holy Quran was more among mothers than fathers. Both the parents and young respondents were of the view that fasting in the month of Ramadan was a family ritual which created bonding among family members and the neighborhood.

Furthermore, to see the influence of religion on everyday life, questions related to some specific cultural traditions like ‘passing the bride under the Holy Quran’, were asked, to which a general acceptance was found. The influence of religion was also apparent in different customs like wedding’, ‘birth’ and ‘death’, although on many occasions it was mixed with cultural practices. Practicing religious rituals were also found among the non-Muslim respondents, which show that in Pakistan sanctity and respect for other religions are prevalent.

For a substantial percentage of youth, religion had an influence on their everyday lives and played a role in defining their social identity. Youth generally disagreed with the notion that religion hindered the process of development in the country. Parents also opined that Islam was a religion based on an ‘accommodating and open-minded’ philosophy about life, but due to the present world scenario (in the context of religious extremism) the picture had been distorted and people associated Islam with extremism. Therefore, contrary to the western countries consumer culture has not been able to erode the traditional religious beliefs and practices in Pakistani society.

c) Gender Equity and Female’s Acceptance as Economically Independent Individuals

Gender equity does not mean that men and women are not the same or equal, rather it means that the opportunities, responsibilities and the rights they attain in society are without any discrimination on the basis of gender. This approach is based on the basic philosophy of fairness of treatment for both men and women in all spheres of life (UNESCO, 2000). Gender equity also includes the attitudinal change of both genders in accepting females as equal contributing members of society as that of men.

Studies have shown that world over consumer culture has increased the trend of individual economic progress as a result of which females are also getting greater opportunities of attaining higher education, better paid jobs and an overall increased women participation in the labour market (World Bank,2002).

Traditionally, the Pakistani household has mostly been explained as a ‘private domain’, whose affairs are largely separated from the world outside the ‘house’ (family). It

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has been described as a highly patriarchal society, where the male-head of the family is the dominant authority. Protecting 'family honor' is the highest value, particularly vested in a household's female members (Donnan, 1997). Females are given lesser opportunities to participate in the 'public domain' activities and they remain dependent on their male family members.

A 'two-tier approach' has been applied to explain how consumer culture has influenced the status of females in the context of family in Pakistani society. This approach has been used to understand the dichotomy of the 'public-private' sphere, in the context of the present and past family values.

In the 'two-tier' approach, the 'first tier' comprises of social status of young females in the domain of their 'public sphere'. As the surveyed population, comprised of post-graduate university students from a specific age cohort, the relevant activities including spending a day/night at friend's place, taking permission from parents, having a personal bank account, buying a durable, taking the decision of getting admission in educational institution for higher studies, etc, were used to measure the level of gender equity in such matters.

The 'second tier' comprised of the status of young females in the context of the 'private sphere' of their households. This includes the decision-making authority and social approval regarding the employment of females. Furthermore, an in-depth understanding of how consumer culture has influenced the acceptance of females by their parents and by young males of their family.

It is interesting to note that young females were encouraged to operate their own personal bank accounts, make decisions regarding the institute for higher studies, were allowed to spend a day/night at a friend's place and buy durables for family. But overall the permissiveness was more for males as compared to females, due to the patriarchal system. Another important aspect which surfaced from the parents' interviews was that parents were lesser in favor of working wives as compared to younger males. However, both mothers as well as fathers were in favor of their daughters adopting professional careers on the pretext of financial security and a shift towards materialism. Moreover, mother's especially emphasized that a woman's first duty was towards her family, which should not be neglected under any cost. Therefore, it may be inferred that female economic independence and their decision making authority in different spheres of their personal lives is gradually being accepted, but with due emphasis on their role in household affairs.

Conclusion

Specific socio-cultural and political situation of a country determines the influence of consumer culture in societies around the world. The Western European region (from where consumer culture originated as a constructing force for structuring the 'modern capitalism') accepted global values such as increased materialism and individualism as a natural phenomenon of change, whereas in the Middle East, South Asia and Africa, consumer culture is taken to be a by-product of the colonial rule and resentment is shown towards phenomena like "MacDonald Culture", American music and fashion" and the English language (Globalization and Cinema,2001). The political regimes in these societies are also

many times taken to be a part of this process. Moreover, in the South Asian region in countries like India the youth is trying to adjust with the ‘fast culture’ of the West along with retaining their traditional values, experiencing ‘identity confusion’. In the East Asian region, the traditional culture is kept safe guarded.

In Pakistani society, the influence of consumer culture on the young population is more of a material nature. In the background of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York (USA) on September 11th 2001, there was an overall change in the world political policy as it focused towards a “war against terrorism” in which Pakistan became a front-line ally of USA. In this scenario the Pakistani society experienced major socio-political changes which influenced the society at large (Chughtai, 2007). The primary data collected for the present study showed a similar trend among the Pakistani youth.

The increasingly dominant role of telecommunication and media, especially during the Musharaf era due to the liberal policies adopted towards the print and electronic media, and the mushrooming of cable/satellite channels in Pakistan gradually showed the dominance of consumer culture in Pakistani society. The most vulnerable to this change was the young population which became attracted towards foreign/branded products culture. The influence of this culture brought a change in gender role perceptions and gender relations. Parallel to this change there was a revival of religious values along with the establishment of material values.

The traditional culture of family bonding, respect and authority of male head of the family and the respect and obligation towards the elders remains to prevail in society. Moreover, the consumer culture has created greater space for the Pakistani women to participate in the ‘public domain’, keeping in guard the traditional honor and chastity of females. Henceforth, it can be said that the global consumer culture is materially changing the Pakistani culture, keeping its traditional collective spirit alive.

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Biographical Note

Dr. Fauzia Saleem Alvi is Assistant Professor at Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab. Lahore-Pakistan.

Dr. Muhammad Hafeez is Professor at Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab. Lahore-Pakistan.

Dr. Riffat Munawar is Associate Professor at Institute of Social and Cultural Studies, University of the Punjab. Lahore-Pakistan.