

Hospitality In Postmodernity: An Indian Perspective.

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ABSTRACT

Despite its seemingly western orientation, literature has sought to apply postmodernism to aspects of culture and society within emerging economies. The impact of globalisation is redefining what non-western consumers think and feel as goods and services previously out of reach are now seen as necessities. There is an implicit need to provide a critique of postmodern hospitality marketing in emerging economies. This paper proposes a postmodern framework for understanding the development of successful hospitality concepts in contemporary India.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a considerable amount of literature has been generated which seeks to apply postmodernism to various aspects of the culture and society of emerging economies. However, the implications of postmodernism within the context of hospitality within these economies have received a paucity of attention from academics and practitioners. This would appear a surprising omission given the rapid growth and transformation of the hospitality sector. This is clearly evident in India with an increasing number of western hospitality franchises including hotels, restaurants and theme parks.

Hospitality marketing has become increasingly complex, being associated not only with conveying an image of quality, performance and authenticity, but with attempting to sell an experience through relating it to the lifestyle constructs of consumers. Academics continue to suggest

that marketing within the sector is different to many other service industries. However, despite the extensive literature that has been developed on these perceived differences, there is evidence to suggest that marketing in these sectors relies heavily on traditional marketing concepts (Williams, 2006). If we are to explore consumption in emerging economies, it seems valid to suggest that there is a need to provide a critique of postmodern marketing from the perspective of the hospitality sector in these economies. In order to do so however, it is necessary to consider postmodernism not as it is seen in the West, but as seen in rapidly evolving economies. This paper proposes a postmodern framework for understanding the development of successful hospitality concepts in contemporary emerging economies, with a focus on developments in India. This is of strategic and practical significance as Miles (1999, p.146-7) suggests, "postmodernism should not represent a creed or club to which you either do or do not belong, but rather a resource which consumer researchers tap into as a means of sharpening their insights as to what it is to be a consumer".

CONTEXTUALISING THE POSTMODERN

The definition and evolution of postmodernism has been widely discussed and debated within the literature. It is suggested that "postmodernity means very different things to many different people" (Baumann 1992, p.vii). One such interpretation has been cited by Goulding (2003, p.156), "With regard to process,

modernism concerns itself with progression, order and harmony, processes that are considered illusionary by postmodernists who hold that the micro practices of everyday life, discontinuities, pluralities, change and instabilities better define the human condition. Furthermore, postmodernism rejects rigid interdisciplinary boundaries and is eclectic in thought and practice". This appears to support the view that postmodernism is essentially a western philosophy which "refers to a break in thinking away from the modern, functional and rational" (Williams 2006, p.484). There is however growing evidence to support that postmodernism is no longer exclusive to western societies. Support for such a belief is given by Chaudhuri and Majumdar (2006, p.12), "a postmodern social system is gradually, if not rapidly, coming to India".

In order to examine the extent postmodern conditions are relevant in contemporary India and to discuss their implications for hospitality marketing strategies, this paper will use a framework that identified the major themes of postmodernism. Firat and Venkatesh (1993) identified the following five conditions of postmodern culture: i) hyperreality ii) fragmentation iii) reversal of consumption and production iv) decentralising of the subject v) paradoxical juxtapositions (of opposites).

Hyper reality

Hyperreality refers to "the blurring of distinction between the real and the unreal, in which the prefix 'hyper' signifies more real than real. When the real i.e. the environment, is no longer a given, but is reproduced by a simulated environment, it does not become unreal, but realer than real" (Atwal and Williams 2007, p.30). Hyperreality is arguably one of the most contemporary postmodern conditions in contemporary India and is exemplified within the hospitality sector. The example of

Bollywood has been cited to illustrate the so-called 'Disneyfication' of reality within the context of contemporary Indian society. "Bollywood captures not only the imagination in the form of song, music and dance but fairy tale settings, romantic melodrama and heroic storylines immerses the viewer in 'simulated reality'" (Atwal and Williams 2008, p.3). The diversification of the Bollywood brand franchise includes the development of a film theme park similar to Hollywood studio parks scheduled to open in Mumbai in 2010. The proposed theme park will feature a wide range of Bollywood experiences including Bollywood cafes, a hall of fame, museums, Bollywood rides, sets, shoot visits and simulator experiences. However, it is not just the fantasy world of Bollywood that is developing postmodern theme park experiences for the Indian consumer. Turner International has recently launched American-style amusement parks based on the children's television channels, Cartoon Network and Pogo. Indeed, the conceptualization of theme parks that are tailored to delivering a hyperreality experience is gaining momentum as illustrated by the plans to open a space-themed park, SpaceWorld near to Pune. Also available to Indian consumers is the snow theme park, Snow World in Hyderabad that incorporates attractions such as a natural snowscape, alpine forest and simulated animatronics of penguins and polar bears. The hyperreality phenomenon has wide ranging implications, "Hyperreality engenders a general loss of the sense of authenticity - i.e. what is genuine or real" (Berthon and Katsikeas 1998, p.151). This is clearly illustrated by the development of so-called virtual experiences in which postmodern consumers consume imagery and do not focus on what the images represent. For example, Taj Hotels offer virtual tours via their website. The result is that it appears that in postmodern society consumers have become fascinated by signs and as a result, they exist in a state

where signs and images have become more important than what they stand for. As Miller and Real (1998, p.30) argue, "we live in a world where the image or signifier of an event has replaced direct experience and knowledge of its referent or signified".

Fragmentation

"Fragmentation relates to the marketplace and consumers becoming fractured and kaleidoscopic, due to the increase and proliferation of brands, products, media and technology" (Tomasevic 2007, p.46). Postmodern culture and society is seen to exhibit the fragmentation of markets, media and experiences. Market fragmentation is characterised by the emergence of smaller segments and the by-product of target marketing. This is evident within the Indian luxury hotel and hospitality sector in which promotional campaigns are targeting specific lifestyle segments. Media fragmentation is demonstrated "both by the proliferation of media vehicles and by the dissolution of programming materials into short, momentary images and sounds typified by MTV" (Patterson 1998, p.69-70). A review of media content in India reveals that news, entertainment, lifestyle, sport and celebrity gossip are merged increasingly into one. This can be attested by the integration of hospitality and tourism related themes in a variety of media formats. For example, the launch of the low-cost Indian airline, Kingfisher Airlines and their so-called "flying models" dominated the Indian media landscape. Fragmentation of experiences "result in 'bricolage' markets, that is consumers who do not present a united, centred self and, therefore, set of preferences, but instead a jigsaw collage of multiple representations of selves and preferences even when approaching the same product category" (Firat and Schultz 1997, p.191). Postmodern consumers are searching a multiple set of preferences and experiences. Indeed, an increasing number of luxury hotel resorts in India operate as so-

called "cathedrals of consumption" (Ritzer, 1999). According to Featherstone (1991), the diversity and freedom of choice, emphasising difference is a cornerstone of fragmented identities and lifestyles.

Juxtaposition of Opposites

Juxtaposition of opposites has been described as "opposing ideas, styles and conditions are brought together and blended together and blended to create something new and fresh" (Patterson 1998, p.69). This is typified in many facets of culture and society within developing economies, where modern values interplay with traditional values. India is no exception. For example, luxury spa resorts offer a range of health and wellness services that combine the traditional practices of Ayurveda with Western concepts. Underpinning this condition is the notion of "Indianness" that reflects the ability to construct an identity that amalgamates Western influences with locally rooted values (Shivkumar 2007). Western fast food retailers such as McDonalds in India have introduced many local inspired items on their menus. As Tomasevic (2007, p.46) argues, "This supports the notion of difference and that it is possible to have parts of the self that are in opposition, inconsistent and diverse, and that these variations can co-exist at the same time".

Decentralised Subjects

"Decentred subjects is the reverse of centredness where individuals are unambiguously defined by their occupation, social class, demographics, etc" (Proctor and Kitchen 2002, p.149). For example, Atwal and Khan (2008, p.47) observe changing luxury consumption patterns in India, "The luxury consumer has become less homogeneous and increasingly diverse". This is reinforced by developments in so-called Middle India. Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania (2008)

discuss the findings of "The Bunty Syndrome" by Euro RSCG India and "The Dhoni Effect: Rise of Small Town India" by Ernst & Young to highlight the growing influence of urban towns and rural markets. This has significant implications for consumer consumption within the hospitality sector. Traditionally consumers in India were seen as conservative, however recent surveys suggest this may be a thing of the past. For example, the growing interest in wines has encouraged significant growth in wine consumption in India. According to a RNCOS research report, "Indian Foods and Drinks Market: Emerging Opportunities", the Indian wine market is expected to grow at a CAGR of nearly 14% and 23% in value and volume respectively from 2008 to 2012 (Maheshwari 2008).

Reversal of consumption and production

"The reversal of production and consumption explains how production has lost its privileged position in society. Consumers use consumption, instead of products, to define themselves" (Tomasevic 2007, p.46). Postmodern consumption is thus used to define and express identities within society. Sinha (2008 p.9) identified the Transition Generation as a generation of consumers who has transformed the meaning of consumerism in India, "Letting go has meant that discretionary expenditures are getting an increasing share of their wallet". Recent evidence lends support to the growing significance of material lifestyles and conspicuous consumption in emerging economies. The appeal to social aspirations has become a prominent feature of hotel and hospitality advertising campaigns in India. For example, "For Those Who Think Big, A Room To Match" is a headline for a print advertisement for The Leela Palace Kempinski in Bangalore. A further development is the intrinsic nature of contemporary consumption that is reflected

in the increasingly experiential nature of tourism and hospitality service offerings. For example, Royal Tented Taj Spa (Taj Hotels, Resorts & Palaces) at the Rambagh Palace in Jaipur seeks to re-create the mobile palaces used by the Mughal emperors of the 16th and 17th centuries. The luxury resort invites guests via its website a taste of royal living, "A luxury and extravagance that was once a sole preserve of kings" (www.tajhotels.com/palace/rambaghpalcejaiipur). As Firat and Schultz (1997, p.193) suggest "The postmodern individual has involved into Homo consumericus, a creature defined by consumption and the experiences derived there from".

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Many countries with developing economies are in unusual market positions, appearing to stand in a complex of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern states. It is not suggested here that in such economies modernity has come to an end. "Modernity has not exhausted itself; it may be in crises but it continues to shape the contours of our lives" (Seidman 1994, p.1). Recent socio-economic developments have however significantly changed consumption processes in India and we can therefore conclude that postmodern influences are evident and of increasing significance.

Consumption and the marketing concept, as it is perceived in postmodern societies, is a relatively new way of thinking. As suggested by Bulmar and Oliver (2004), consumers do not only buy products: they buy the lifestyles, stories, experiences and emotions that products convey. Meyer and Schwager (2007, p.118) defined customer experience as "the internal and subjective response customers have to any direct or indirect contact with a company".

In recognition of the nature of postmodern consumption within the hospitality sector, marketers need to therefore make a shift

away from a traditional features-and-benefits approach to marketing. This means the adoption of a holistic approach that emphasizes "interactivity, connectivity and creativity" (Cova 1996, p.20). Emotional experiences shape consumer's attitudes towards brands and products. The pleasure of staying at a luxury spa resort, or the pride and joy experienced when friends admire memorabilia strengthen brand engagement, involvement and ultimately differentiation. This is reinforced by Meyer and Schwager (2007, p.119), "A successful brand shapes customers' experiences by embedding the fundamental value proposition in offerings' every feature". New approaches need to be therefore considered within the hospitality sector in order to capitalise on market opportunities. Those who market experientially will achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. The movement of experiential marketing has already begun in India.

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