

Opinion: 'Conscious consumerism' – what is it? What of it?

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The authors explain how the 'Boycott China' and 'anti-nepotism' movements are changing consumer behaviour

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Apart from Covid-19 and its direct fall-outs, few other crucial 'happenings' have caught the Indian imagination and have managed to change the discourse within the economy (both, online and offline). Two such happenings are the ever-escalating and ever-growing 'Boycott/Buycott China' and the 'anti-nepotism in entertainment (specifically, Bollywood)' social campaigns (movements).

With the government and more importantly the general populace in the country trying to restrict trade from China and promoting goods made in India and Bollywood shattering due to debates around nepotism and the subsequent talk of the rise of self-made artists, there lies an underlying new form of consumerism binding the two contemporary happenings.

Traditionally, consumerism has revolved around the idea that increasing consumption of goods and services is always desirable and that each individual's happiness and well-being depends fundamentally on material possessions (much like materialism). Consumerism is related to the constant purchasing of new goods and services, with little attention to their

actual need, durability, product origin, and the environmental and social consequences involved in their manufacturing, usage, and disposal. Consumerism interferes with the sustainable use of resources in a society by replacing the normal common-sense desire for an adequate supply of life's necessities, with an insatiable quest for things that are purchased by larger and larger incomes to buy those things. In the age of consumerism, convenient and easy-to-use products have taken over the market without really looking into their sustainability. Often one doesn't realise that a miniscule contribution in this mindless consumption leads to a domino effect in the production chain. Further, consumerism is not just limited to products. We also consume more than abundant amounts of services due to easy access and rising incomes. For example, we over-consume the internet and the content provided to us via the internet (most of it harmful). The content delivered to us further triggers a consumption cycle to include processed food, harmful cosmetics, hate speech, pornography, etc.

In the pandemic-stricken new normal, people are skeptical about buying anything. The fear of contacting the disease and the possibility of job loss/pay-cuts is so unsettling that frugality/minimalism has become the order of the day. People are more conscious about what they are buying, from where, at what price, and at what cost to the environment and society. This new form of consumerism is termed as 'conscious consumerism'. The Cambridge dictionary defines the term 'conscious' as 'awake, aware of what is happening around you and able to think'. Again, this is not to narrow the scope of what the term 'conscious' can entail but just to streamline its understanding. The Cambridge dictionary defines 'consumerism' as 'a situation involving large amounts of goods being sold to individuals rather than businesses, especially when this is very important to an economy'. When we try to understand these concepts as a collective, it boils down to understanding 'conscious consumerism' as a movement first and later as a way of life. The same Cambridge dictionary defines 'conscious consumerism' as 'a movement that focuses on positive decisions throughout the buying process, with the intention of helping to balance the detrimental effects that consumerism has had on earth'.

Conventionally, the scope of 'conscious consumerism' has been limited to sustainable farming and eco-friendly ways of manufacturing goods. Although, it is now spilling over to several sectors and industries and is assuming new character such as the Boycott/Buycott China campaign and the anti-nepotism campaign in Bollywood in India.

The boycott of Chinese products, apps, and companies has come at a time when the Chinese (specifically, its Communist party governed People's Liberation Army) aggression at the Indian borders (which has been happening since the 1950s) resulted in an escalation and a stand-off. Apart from retaliating at the borders and in international forums, this time around the Indian populace retaliated with the boycott/buycott China campaign. This campaign now has takers in other countries as well especially the ones China has wronged (and there are many). The boycott/buycott of the 'nepotism circle' in Bollywood and beyond is another exemplification of this rising new form of 'conscious consumerism'. After Sushant Singh Rajput's (a popular and accomplished Bollywood actor) alleged suicide, call for boycott/buycott of the 'nepotism circle' has not only grown

manifold but is even showing results with rising popularity of self-made artists and content creators. While, this act may not fall under the mainstream definition of 'conscious consumerism', it is definitely promoting healthy practices in the entertainment industry and consumers are making conscious choices as to the kind of content they wish to engage with.

'Conscious consumerism' may not be directly visible here but it can definitely be seen through the people who are agents of change and consider the social, environmental, ecological, and political impact of their actions.

Academic research has also touched this topic, albeit sparsely. In marketing, the approach towards 'conscious consumerism' can be found in 'The Socially Conscious Consumer' published in 1972 in the Journal of Marketing. This article typologically classified socially conscious consumers. 'Dollar Voting' which is typically an analogy used to refer to the impact of consumer choice on producers' actions through the flow of consumer payments to producers for their goods and services is another example from research. It was introduced in a research article titled 'Individual Choice in Voting and the Market' published in the Journal of Political Economy in 1954. The vision for consumer rights which is probably the soul-mate of 'conscious consumerism' also picked up pace specifically in the US and Europe around the mid 20th century, same time as the academic publications surfaced. It was sparked by the 35th US President, John F. Kennedy, when he declared the four fundamental consumer rights – the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. These basic principles were further developed after extensive international consultations which led the UN General Assembly to adopt a few guidelines for consumer protection in April 1985, which were later updated in 1999 into a broader framework for countries to support consumer protection. As for now, there are more than 240 organisations from over 100 countries that have unified under a single body named Consumer International.

In India, the Consumer Protection Act came into existence in 1986 to give it a legal authority with the declaration of six basic consumer rights. The 1986 law was not amended, but a new consumer protection law was brought forward as the Consumer Protection Act 2019. The salient features and the principle virtues of the new act revolve largely around a legalised framework for consumer complaints redressal. Additionally, advocating for consumer rights is an essential aspect of the current marketplace setup. There also has been a transformation or evolution to what it means to be a consumer and of late, there has been a focus on the application of making more responsible purchase decisions which brings us back to 'conscious consumerism'.

It is often that we limit our meaning of 'conscious consumerism' to just buying green and shifting to more organic things. Conscious consumption is not just about what products we buy, but is all encompassing – where and how we live, how we travel, the food we consume, how its ingredients have been grown, processed, and packaged, and what happens to the leftovers, the policies followed at the place/unit it is produced, the people involved in producing it, the amount of carbon-footprint it generates, and what not. Every rupee a consumer spends supports the ethics, morals, business practices, and the social

and environmental impact of that company/producer. Hence, it becomes critically important to invest wisely. 'conscious consumerism' as a phenomenon is not just limited to products/services and organisations/producers rather it engages every possible activity happening around us including the recent Boycott China and Boycott nepotism in Bollywood campaigns/movements. It is notable that in alignment with the expanded understanding of 'conscious consumerism', the meaning of the term 'conscious' includes 'socially conscious', 'environmentally conscious', 'ecologically conscious', 'politically conscious', 'health conscious', 'value conscious', etc. 'Conscious consumerism' was earlier believed to be a millennial and an elitist phenomenon. This is not the case anymore. It is now percolating across economies, demographics, classes, and cultures in its varied 'avatars'. The rising popularity of sustainable living coupled with new technology has given producers the economy of scale to bring down prices of sustainable products and/or services. The reduction in prices has helped the price-sensitive groups to jump onto the sustainable/responsible consumption bandwagon. 'Conscious consumerism' is gradually gaining widespread recognition and acceptance.

'Dvija' (a Sanskrit term with its origin in Hinduism), which means 'twice-born' is a term based on the premise that a person is born twice – first physically and then spiritually when one is initiated into a school of vedic tradition to eventually become a 'Dvijjottama' (realised being). A corollary can be drawn for consumerism. It also underwent such a rite of passage and is on-course to becoming a 'mindful' (informed and realised) version of itself. Same can be said about the phenomenon's core actor - the conscious consumer. A conscious consumer is a 'mindful' consumer who takes into consideration the environmental and socio-cultural impact of her/his buying decisions and as a result assumes the moral high ground and reverts to ethical consumerism. Increase in information at hand through several social and digital media has led to the accelerated transformation of consumers into conscious consumers. However, becoming a conscious consumer is not about activism. It is essentially a progressive step towards a brighter future and thus inculcating the same as a 'way of life' (culture, religion, traditions, and system of justice, all rolled into one) is paramount in ensuring more sustainable and ethical practices not just by fragments of certain communities but as collective visionaries for a better tomorrow.

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