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HEDONIC CONSUMPTION & CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE INDIAN CONSUMER: EMERGING TRENDS AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The foundation of Modern Hedonism can be traced back to the statement of Marketing Guru Levy who said "People buy products not only for what they can do, but also for what they mean", (Levy, 1959). As India shifts towards a nucleus family from that of joint family system, and people become more and more cocooned in their own small environment, the importance of pleasure spending or Hedonism is gaining relevance. Added to this is the fact that the Country's demographics are undergoing a rapid change, with the young people in the age group less than 25 forming more than 40 percent of the total population. Add to this the largest middle class in the world, and increased disposable income, making it one of the most sought after markets in the world. While previous research has focused on Hedonism being symbolized by experiential purchases rather than material ones, in this study the main focus has been on the Primary Intention of the consumer, and less on the physical aspects of the goods. The study follows an exploratory research methodology, and was conducted through Focus Group Discussions and Primary Consumer Survey. More than 200 respondents from the two most thriving Indian metropolitan cities of Bangalore and Delhi, belonging to various age groups, filled in the questionnaire. The results helped us identify various factors that shape the purchase behavior of the average Indian consumer. The results also pointed at a marked change in the preferences and mindset of the Indian consumer, and the effect of the changing demographics in India. In particular there was a clear divide in the behavior of various age groups as far as the Hedonic tendencies were concerned & a clear demarcation was visible between the pre- and post-Liberalization generations.

KEYWORDS

hedonic consumption, Indian consumer.

INTRODUCTION

Pleasure spending, or spending money with the intention of experiencing happiness and pleasure, is an important part of everyday consumer life. The joy of choosing, after going through complex decision making processes gives immense satisfaction to consumers. Choosers' satisfaction with a desirable outcome is greater than that of non-choosers because they enjoy contemplating a greater number of pleasant thoughts during the decision task; conversely, choosers' dissatisfaction with an undesirable outcome is exacerbated relative to that of non-choosers by the greater number of task related unpleasant thoughts (Botti and Iyengar 2004). The basic idea behind hedonistic thought is that pleasure is the only thing that is good for a person. This is often used as a justification for evaluating actions in terms of how much pleasure and how little pain (i.e. suffering) they produce. In very simple terms, a hedonist strives to maximize this total pleasure (pleasure minus pain).

Prior research indicates that consumers prefer making their own choices rather than having others choose on their behalf and that they are more satisfied with self-chosen as opposed to externally-dictated outcomes (Brehm 1966; Langer 1975). These prior studies have nevertheless investigated choice only in relation to hedonic consumption. It is possible therefore that the enhancing effects of choice on outcome satisfaction may be restricted to such hedonic contexts. Hedonic tasks are inherently self rewarding whereas utilitarian tasks are undertaken to pursue higher end goals. Conjoining hedonism, as a view as to what is good for people, to utilitarianism has the result that all action should be directed toward achieving the greatest amount of happiness for everyone.

While most of research has either been limited to the psychological affects, or the process of hedonistic buying, precious little seems to have been done for Indian consumers and marketers. The demographic and psychographic profile of India has been changing at a furious pace since the last decade. Opening up of the economy, liberalization, the largest middle class anywhere in the world, the choice of India as the latest destination for all MNC's, is bringing about a rapid change in the decision making and purchase pattern of the Indian consumer. Whereas earlier the emphasis was on thrift, the current emphasis is on spending as the earning members grow younger and younger in these new and changing demographics. With the profiles changing so consistently, there is a constant need for research and studies to keep up with the change.

The study tries to track & identify the causes of the growth of Open Hedonism, as a younger India emerges, considering the fact that more than two-thirds of Indian population is less than 35 years old, making it one of the most sought after markets, especially for marketers of Hedonic Products. We have tried to use the changing demographics of the consumers as the base of the research and study them according to various parameters used in any demographic study. We have also tried to study the two distinct age-groups, one from the pre-liberalization era, and another from the post liberalization era to help achieve our objectives. We used a comprehensive Literature Review to gain perspective of various studies undertaken till now and use the insights of these studies to further strengthen our research. We were hopeful that the above two would help us in establishing the effect of age on increasing Hedonic Consumption, if any. Finally we tried to derive implications for marketers from the findings and analyze how these could be used in the formulation of an effective marketing strategy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As mentioned earlier, the Hedonic concept has been of substantial interest to researchers, and the need to probe further with respect to growing consumer consumption is visible in the comprehensive review being undertaken and the host of studies being conducted in the past few years. The enormity of the concept and its subsequent benefit to the marketers and researchers alike is gaining mammoth proportions, and generating keen interest to further our understanding of this concept. The concept is also gaining in credibility thanks to the growing belief that for some products and some situations the concept of Marketing is slowly but steadily moving away from the traditionalist view of basic 'need satisfaction', and towards the modern view that not all needs have to be utilitarian in nature. The consumer is increasingly looking for different ways to satisfy himself. As the marketers, in a rush to satisfy all basic and latent needs of a consumer, keep coming up with a whole lot of novel methods to satisfy both the utilitarian and convenience need of the consumers, they seem to have also been slowly but surely condemning the consumer to a more cocooned existence. With the development of new distribution channels including home delivery, e-shopping, TV shopping, Mail orders and what not, the consumer is increasingly missing the personal joy and satisfaction that he used to derive from using the traditional channels. At the same time the Marketers are not leaving any stone unturned in making and developing new products, ranging from personal home equipments, to do-it-yourself guides and kits for furniture, personal grooming products, electronic self-aids, and a host of products to massage the consumer's ego which are increasingly removing the social element involved in the traditional products & services.

All this is increasing the growing use of Hedonism in the consumer buying process. However it would be wrong to say that the concept of Hedonism is a new concept, and is a derivation of the needs of our changing times and values. Concept of Hedonism has been existing since the ancient ages, from the times of Socrates and Mahabharata alike.

For the purpose of this paper we will use the definition of Hedonic Consumption as defined by Hirschman & Holbrook in 1982 as "Hedonic Consumption designates those facets of consumer behavior that relates to the multi-sensory, fantasy, and emotive aspects of one's experience with the products" (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). This definition has not only been cited extensively in all major hedonic related research, but also seems apt for the objectives of our study.

While researchers have tried to apply Hedonic perspectives to various areas including Product Classes, Mental Constructs, Individual Differences, Behavioral and other constructs (Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991; Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982; Lee & Hyman, 2008; Warren, 1908), in this study we will try and focus on the Product Usage part, since that is more in tune with our study as it not just helps in identifying the features and attributes but also focuses on the decision making process (Huber & Holbrook, 1980). This would not just help in the marketer understanding the brand choice of the consumer but also the strategic implication behind such a brand choice (Hirschman, 1982; Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Hoch & Loewenstein, 1991).

HEDONISM-INDIAN CONTEXT

There exist a lot of differences between the ways Hedonism is looked upon in the western culture as compared to how we see it in India. In India sacrifice is looked upon as the ultimate test of human character. To build one's character one is supposed to shun various if not all type of pleasures which satisfy only oneself and are not in the larger interest of society. To sacrifice for the larger interest is the way we all are taught right from our early childhood, and any other ways are looked down upon. The objective is always universal happiness, and aim is to satisfy others, even if it means pain and abdication to one's own self. We are the land of Mahavir, Buddha, Rama, Sita and numerous other Gods, Goddesses, who have always believed in and taught us the importance of abdication, and sacrifice. The truth always lies in the greater good, and all other means and ways have been looked upon as negative characteristics. Self-pleasure has always been related with the bad and evil people, and is considered to be the most selfish and heinous act. The modern Mahatma, MK Gandhi, characterized the epitome of human values as we should follow in this country. In a quirky way, all this was also possible in the last couple of centuries as we were always short of fulfilling our needs, and the basic necessities gained significance over other more frivolous needs.

In contrast the western society has always been a society used to indulgence. The western society which was more or less limited to Europe had managed to advance its requirements multi-fold, and had used various means including conquering other nations, to satisfy this need for indulgence. The Christian God Jesus Christ is shown in various stages and is even depicted as an indulgent God. The last supper depictions clearly show Christ feasting & drinking wine, and hence most Western festivals allow one to indulge, whereas ours force the concept of 'Fasting' and 'Abstinence' on us.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The aim of this article is to study and identify the consumer choices on products that could be classified as Hedonic in nature, that is those products that can offer not just utilitarian but also an experiential and hedonic experience. As mentioned before the objective is to find out the current trends and behavior change that is taking place due to the changing demographics of the Indian consumer, especially in the post-liberalization era. The main objective of the study was to analyze the various attributes/factors used, by the consumer during the purchase decision making process, in order of importance as placed by him. By doing so we hope to study and understand the consumer's mindset while purchasing a hedonic product, and also analyze differences, if any, that existed in the intentions of consumers belonging to the pre- and post-liberalization era. The study should help us understand the kind of attributes/ features that consumers from both these era lend importance to.

In addition we also had a minor objective to identify the influencers involved in the decision making process of consumers belonging to both the eras. This would help us in analyzing and identifying differences if any, and help marketers chart individual strategies based on the existing differences.

METHODOLOGY

Since precious little work seems to have been done in the Indian context, and since the Indian markets are in an expansion phase, we decided to go with a three phase methodology, which would not only allow us to address the main concerns of the study, but would also help us get a snapshot view of the changes, if any, that were taking place due to the fast paced liberalization that the country was undergoing.

In the **first phase** two Focus Discussion groups were formed. One focus group was formed of respondents who were less than 26 years. This group was primarily from Indian Institute of management Indore students. Since the students came from varied backgrounds, the discussions helped us in arriving at the various attributes looked at by the students while buying a Mobile Handset. The group also identified some of the major influencers in their purchase decision making process. The same process was repeated with the second Focus Group, consisting of working professionals in the age group of 36+. The only difference was that this discussion was conducted on Internet conference chat, as the respondents were located across the country. Both the Focus Group consisted of 6 respondents.

Once the criteria were identified, in **phase two** of the study, a test questionnaire was prepared and further tested on seven respondents in each of the age group identified. This enabled and helped in removal of any confusing statements/inferences. The testing was done by personally administering the questionnaire to the randomly selected participants, and was conducted online for both the groups of respondents. It also allowed us to make concise the list of criteria as identified in the focus group discussion.

Once the final questionnaire was prepared it was administered on both the sets of respondents in the **third and final phase** of the study. The administering was done online, since it was the quickest and most convenient method of reaching to all the respondents, who were located in various parts of the country. Also the online response would help protect the respondent's identity, helping in better and unbiased responses. The respondents were selected across two distinct age categories- One category consisting of people below 26 years of age, and the second category consisting of people above the age of 36. The main reason behind this distinct age groups was the objective of gaining insights into the changes that liberalization has brought, and also to avoid any permeation of data across categories, which would have biased our inferences.

Care was also taken to ensure that we had an equal mix of Males and Females in our responses. This was necessary to once again ensure that no biasness crept in. Also it could have helped us in gaining further insights as to whether there was any difference in the purchasing pattern across the genders. All respondents selected had to have a minimum of 2 years of work experience. This was to ensure that each of the respondents would not necessarily have to be influenced by his family's decision/financial ability. Each respondent could have the ability to make independent buying decisions if so required, thus removing any chance of family financial bias creeping in.

Finally all the respondents selected were either pursuing their PGP courses in Management, or had completed their PGDBM sometime in their career. This was one of the most important decisions, because we felt that this would take out any negative/positive effect of education on the respondent. Since all the respondents were equally qualified, any difference in pattern could not be attributed to the psychographic variable derived from education. In short the study neutralized the effect of Education on the whole survey, thus ensuring that we would get a much more objective analysis, which would provide us relevant references. The questionnaire was administered to more than 240 respondents, out of which 200 responded with the full questionnaire and were found to be valid for the purpose of the study. In the end the strategic implications for the marketers were analyzed and the possibilities of Future Research were discussed.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

There were a total of 200 respondents, out of which 98 were females and 102 were males. 84 respondents belonged to the under-26 age group and 116 were from the over 36 age group. This allowed us a fine balance between the demographic profiles of the respondents.

We start by listing some of the salient features of the survey, which would provide us with an overview of the survey results. The detailed charts and graphs are then discussed later in the paper.

Forty-two percent of the respondents were students, twenty-nine percent were self-employed, and twenty-seven percent were salaried and just two percent were housewives. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents earned more than Rs.35000/- per month, whereas thirty-six percent earned less than Rs.5000/- per month, of who most were students and survived on internships and previous earnings. The rest were comprised of housewives.

Nokia was the most favored handset used by more than forty-four percent of the respondents. Samsung and Sony followed with twenty-five and twenty-four percent respectively, while LG failed to open its account, giving us an indication of the importance attached to the Brand name of a product.

Sleekness and Style were the highest ranked options, with more than sixty percent respondents selecting them as the most important feature they would look for, which implies that these features are in demand across age groups. Surprisingly PC connectivity and Blue Tooth enabling also featured reasonably high in spite of not being very highly ranked in the focus group discussions.

Eighty percent of the respondents mentioned that they had been using mobile handsets for more than three years, while fifty-nine percent mentioned that they had been using it for more than five years. This would imply that the usage of mobile handsets is percolating downwards among the younger generations. Not surprising was the fact that not one respondent mentioned that he/she had been using the handset for less than one year.

More than eighty-eight percent of the respondents mentioned that they had changed their handsets more than two times, while fifty-two percent clearly mentioned that they had changed their phones at least three times. This would clearly imply that consumers are no longer reluctant to change their handsets, in spite of the high costs involved.

Brand Name was ranked as the number one attribute that the respondents give importance to in relation to all the other attributes that were mentioned in the questionnaire. Durability was given the lowest ranking, with as many as sixty-six percent of the respondents putting it as the least important attribute, one of the clearest indication of the growing tendency towards hedonic consumption.

Friends were found to be the most influential source in the decision making process of forty-two percent of the respondents. Family members with twenty-four percent came as the next most important influencer. News items and advertisements scored pretty lowly as influencers.

Thirty-six percent of the respondents mentioned that the main reason for buying a phone would be an attractive handset, whereas peer pressure and personal like also scored quite high with twenty-two and twenty percent respectively. Less than twenty-two percent were ready to buy a new handset only in the case of old phone becoming mal-functional or obsolete. This too would imply the readiness of today's consumer to experiment with new gadgets, even with the older ones giving good utility.

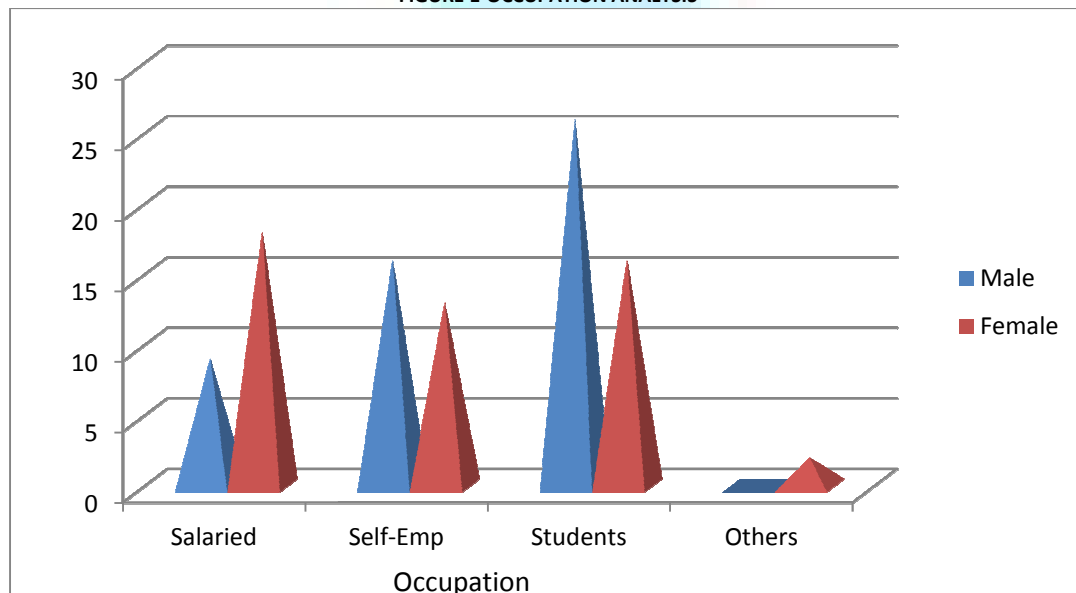
Seventy-five percent of the respondents said yes to purchasing an expensive watch, in spite of owning an expensive handset, which further implies that the buying power and mindset of the average Indian consumer is increasing, and his aspirational levels are touching new highs.

In deciding on the importance of the three main factors as emerged from the Focus Group Discussion, all the three attributes of Utility, Style & Looks, and Keeping up with the latest trends got similar kind of responses. This implies that there is major partiality towards the features from one age group or the other. Almost seventy percent of the respondents rated Durability as the lowest wanted feature in their decision making process.

Finally Increased affordability and need to be recognized as a fashion leader scored quite high in the reasons for repurchasing a new handset. Peer pressure and self-satisfaction were close behind, with gifting allowing for a new opportunity for positioning for the marketers.

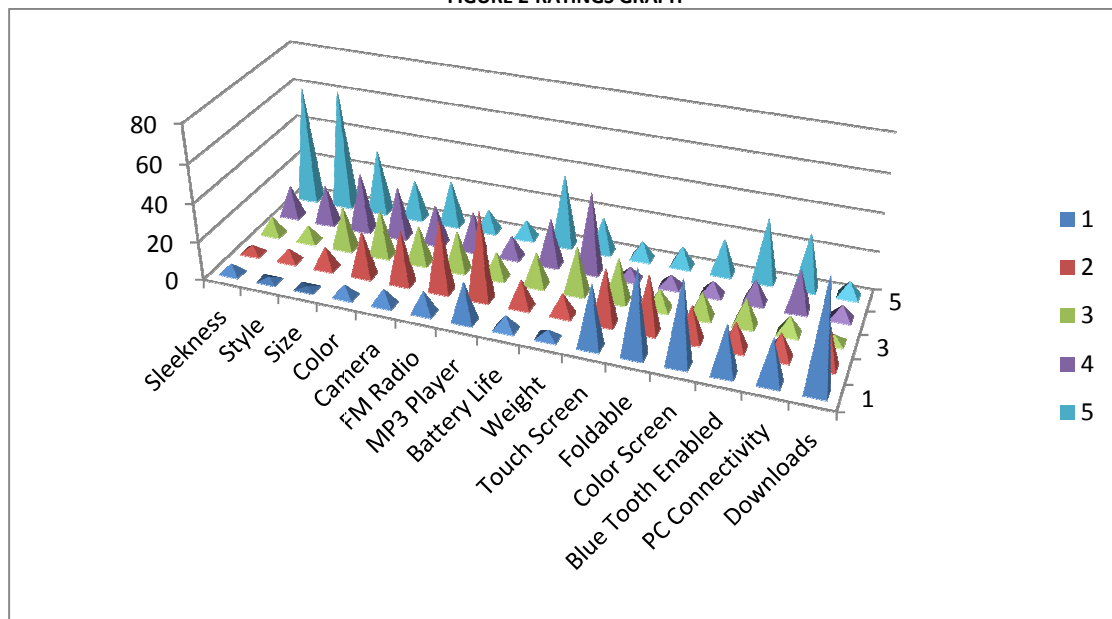
Some more in-depth analysis follows based on the raw data available from the survey. We now try to analyze the data based on our objectives as decided earlier, of trying to find the importance and effect of age on the hedonic aspect in purchase.

FIGURE 1-OCCUPATION ANALYSIS



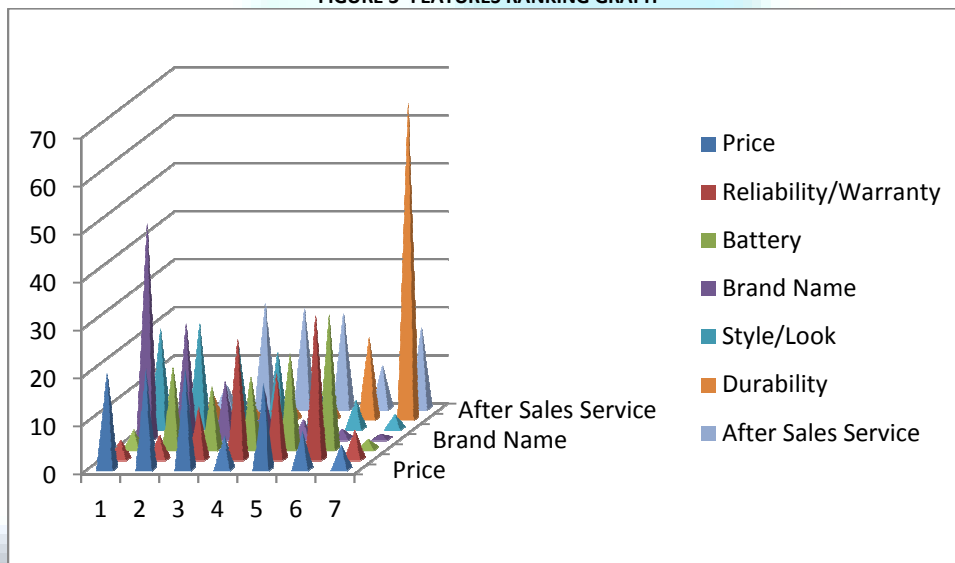
The above Figure clearly shows that the analysis is not biased as the proportion of males and females is almost equal. We can observe that more men are students and self-employed, but more females are salaried. However it is heartening to note that there exists almost complete equality in the spread of gender, thereby removing any chances of bias creeping in.

FIGURE 2-RATINGS GRAPH



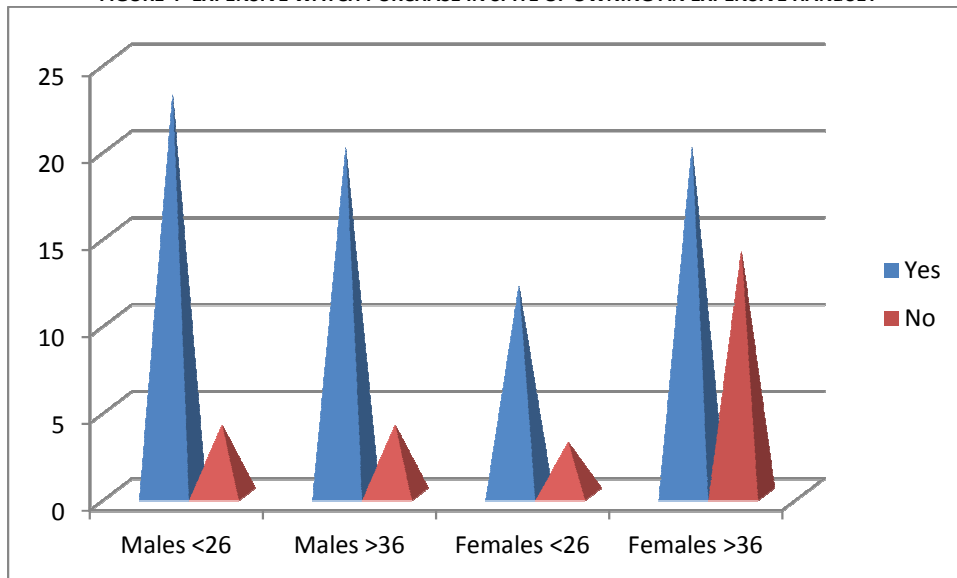
The above graph gives an extremely comprehensive view of the respondent's likes and dislikes, his preferences, and the choices that he is least bothered with. A closer look would clearly indicate the following. Sleekness and style get the highest scores across the two age groups, which clearly indicate the hedonic nature of the purchases. Battery life gets a reasonably good score, implying that the utilitarian value of the product is also important to some of the respondents. We also note surprising high scores for Blue-Tooth Enabling as well as PC connectivity. This should imply that the mobile handset is no longer just a one dimensional usage instrument, but is also finding other means to satisfy latent desires of consumers. Surprising thing to note is that features like FM Radio and MP3 players are hardly rated by any of the respondents. This is a loud and clear message for the marketer-unnecessary frills are not welcome, nor useful as a sales pitch. The most surprising observation however remains the absolute rejection of the Download feature that most companies today keep harping on. It should give them a warning to be more perceptible towards the consumer needs, rather than concentrating on useless marketing efforts. Or the marketer needs to improve this service to keep pace with the buyer. All in all the above figure sends out clear signals to the marketers, with strong likes and dislikes.

FIGURE 3- FEATURES RANKING GRAPH



The above figure too gives a comprehensive picture of the consumer's mindset. In this figure we have ranked the various features according to his choices and preferences. Notably all rankings have to be mutually exclusive, forcing the Respondent to make choices in a simulated atmosphere.

FIGURE 4- EXPENSIVE WATCH PURCHASE IN SPITE OF OWNING AN EXPENSIVE HANDSET

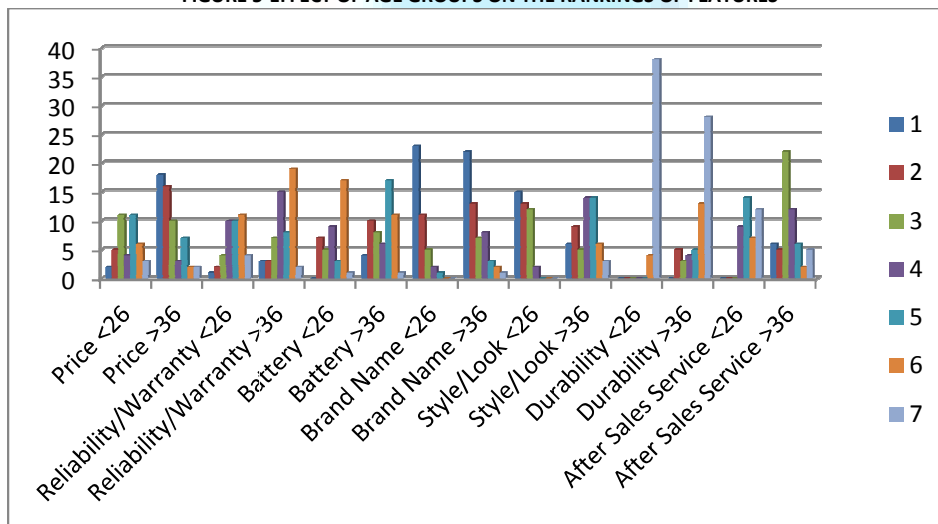


From the above figure we can easily notice that most of the men in each age group would want to own an expensive watch even after owing an extremely expensive mobile phone.

The Trend continues in the category of Females aged under-26. However the gap between the yes and no drops significantly for the category of Females aged over-36. This may imply that as age increases, especially in females, they tend to become more pragmatic and practical. This category may rely more on the utilitarian aspects rather than the Hedonic aspects.

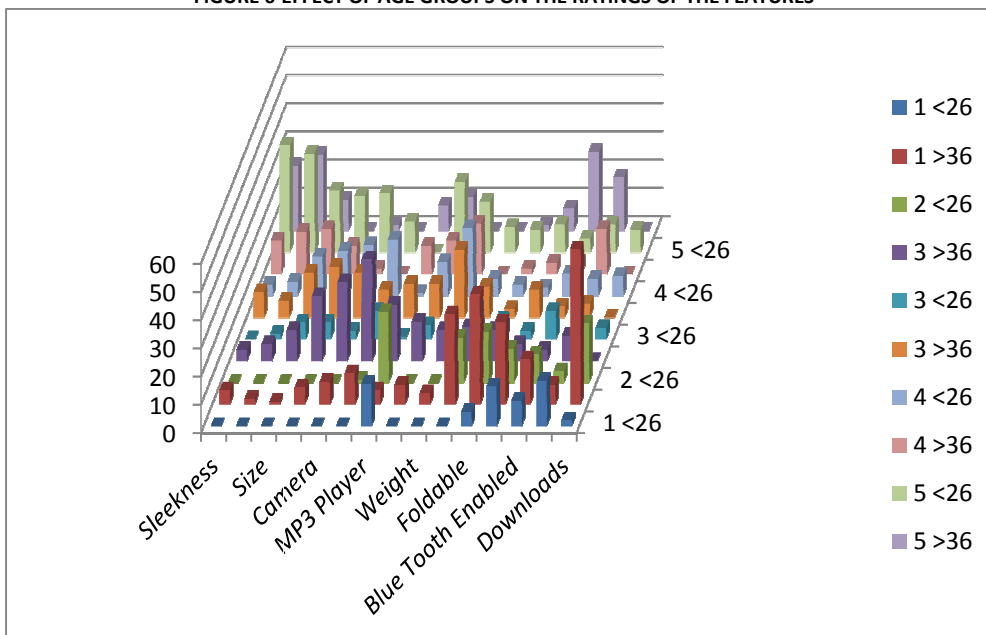
As explained in the figure below, this graph gives us a break-up of how the various age groups ranked the features. It is clearly noticeable that the needs of the two age groups seem to be changing and going in diverse directions. Most importantly it shows that the post-liberalization generation has a more hedonic approach in their purchases.

FIGURE 5-EFFECT OF AGE GROUPS ON THE RANKINGS OF FEATURES



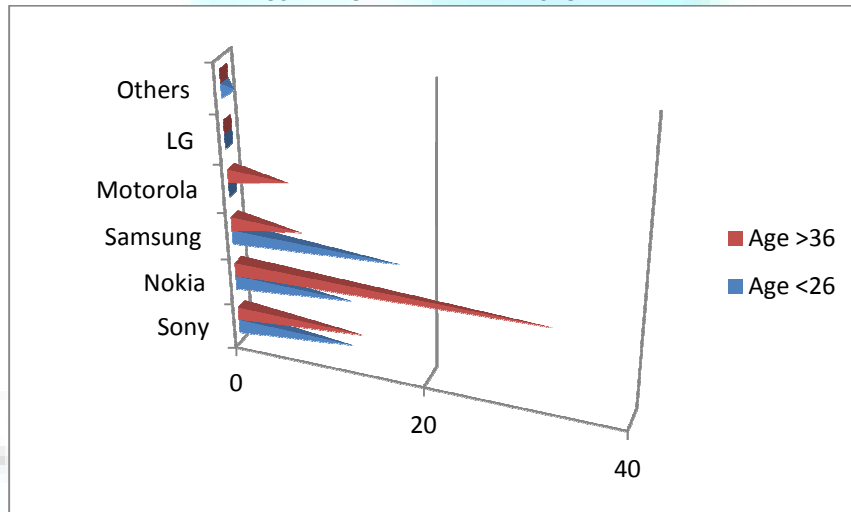
The Age Group of less than 26 years gives better ranks to the features of Brand Name, and Style/Looks. More importantly the group completely ignores the Price, Reliability and Battery features. The Age Group of more than 36 on the other hand is much more concerned about the price and the battery part, even though Brand Name still scores the best ranks even in this group.

FIGURE 6-EFFECT OF AGE GROUPS ON THE RATINGS OF THE FEATURES



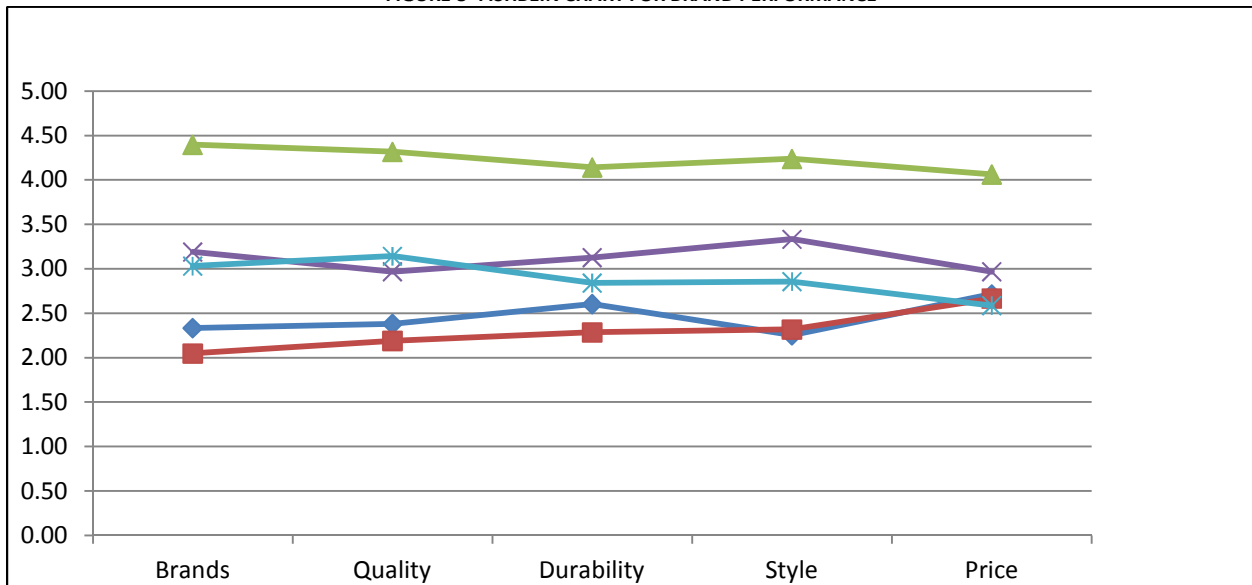
The above figure once again depicts a comprehensive picture. This time it shows us the split in the choices according to the age groups. This is an important analysis for us, since it helps us in identifying the various features that are important to the two age groups. It is clearly visible that the under-26 age group is very enamored by the sleekness and style of the products. The over-36 age category however shows much higher affinity towards the features of Blue Tooth Enabled and PC Connectivity. The over-36 category also thinks that the feature of Battery Life is reasonably important. In contrast the younger age group is clearly satisfied with only two features, and we can observe that both these features point towards a Hedonistic bend of mind. Other features get some representation from the under-26 age group, but most of the features are not really rated very highly by both the age groups. Finally we can clearly notice that the feature of Downloads is clearly rejected by both the age groups. In the final analysis it would be perfectly right if we infer from the above that the younger age group is more tilted towards the Hedonic satisfaction, and is not really bothered by the usage aspect of the product. The over-36 age group in contrast is much more concerned about the usage aspects, and is not as involved in satisfying their hedonic needs. We observe the trend of aspiring for more hedonic satisfaction as the age group is lowered from over-36 to under-26.

FIGURE 7-AGE BRAND PREFERENCE GRAPH



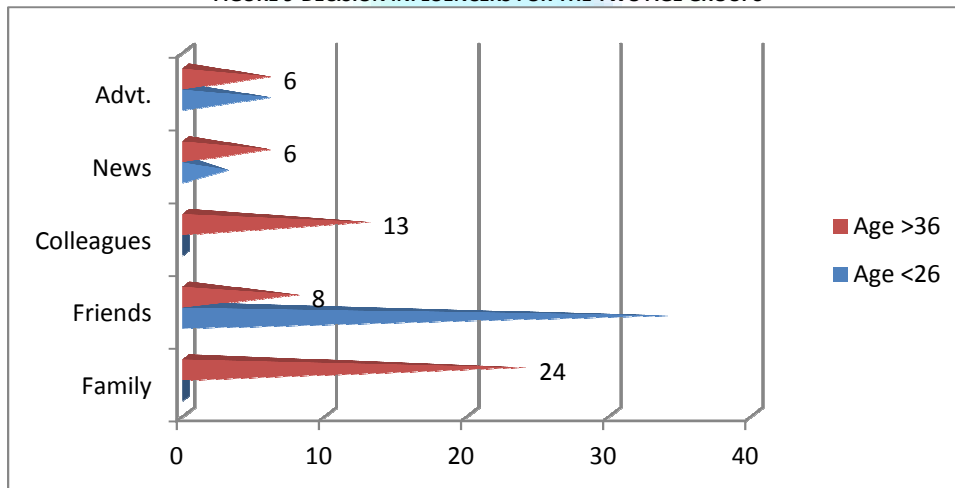
Here again we notice the differences between both the age group. Previously we had seen that both the age groups had given quite high rating and good ranking to the Brand Name of the product. But here we see that there is a vast difference between the brands chosen by each age group. While the over-36 age group has full belief in the tried and tested name of Nokia, the younger age group is seems to be more interested in the current brands of Sony and Samsung. These brands are catering to the current needs of the market, and hence the chosen brands over the older and more creditable brands like Nokia and Motorola. This again is a clear signal of the increasing Hedonic consumption of the younger age group. We can clearly observe that the under-26 age group is more comfortable with the new, latest and trendy brands, instead of the tried and tested brand of Nokia, which is the most preferred brand of the older age group. In fact even the younger age group recognizes the image of Nokia and awards it more credibility, as we can see from the Fishbein Chart. An observation of the Fishbein chart shows that customer’s perception about Nokia as a brand is extremely good and above its competitors’ brands in all aspects. Brand value of Nokia is perceived as very high in comparison to its competitors.

FIGURE 8- FISHBEIN CHART FOR BRAND PERFORMANCE



Hence it is relatively simpler to infer that the under-26 age group is more interested in satisfying their hedonic needs, than the actual utilitarian needs. The choice of preferred brand is changing as we move up through the age groups, with the over-36 age group clearly preferring the safe brand of Nokia over the newer and trendier competitors.

FIGURE 9-DECISION INFLUENCERS FOR THE TWO AGE GROUPS



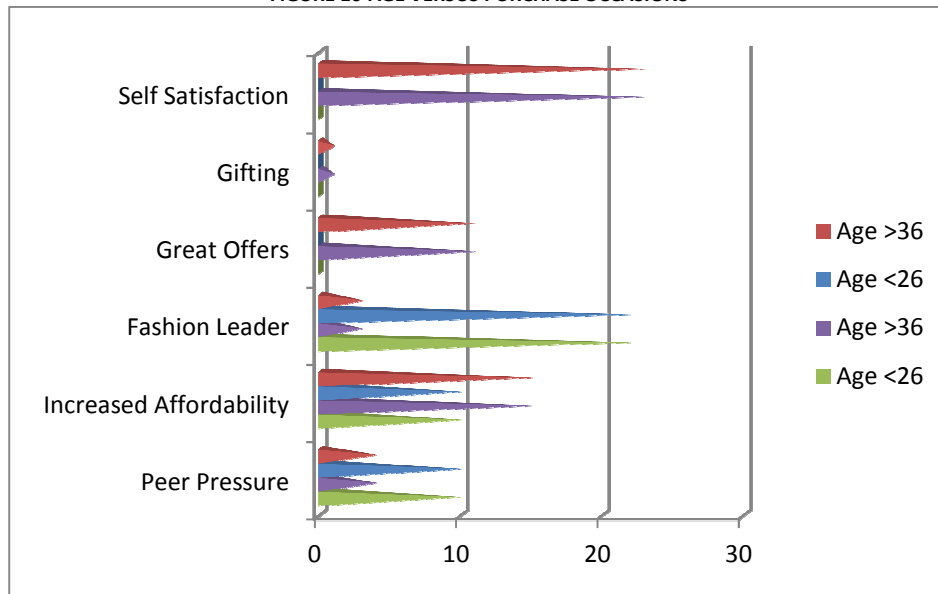
The above figure gives us a clear pointer towards the decision making process of both the selected age-groups. Here again we see a stark difference between both the age groups as far as their influencers are concerned. While the under-26 age group relies and is more influenced by his/her friends, the over-36 age group is influenced mostly by his/her family members.

This once again clearly tells us about the Hedonic intent of the younger age group. The under-26 age group is keen to impress their friends, their immediate social group, and hence is most concerned about what his/her immediate social group thinks. This age group is also influenced somewhat by the advertisements, again pointing towards Hedonic satisfaction.

The over-36 age group meanwhile relies mostly on immediate family, which allows us to infer that mostly it is a joint decision, and the utilitarian aspects of the products would be coming into the picture.

This figure and analysis again points towards our initial hypothesis, and suggests that the younger age group is more frivolous in its decision making, relying mostly on their hedonic needs. We reconfirm the analysis by looking at the figure 10, on the next page, which goes into further details, and clearly brings out the differences between both the age groups.

FIGURE 10-AGE VERSUS PURCHASE OCCASIONS



MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

From the above analysis and findings, we can clearly infer various aspects and facets of the changing consumption pattern among the educated youth in India. These findings have clearly supported our hypothesis, which were formed at the beginning of the study.

Firstly it is clear that hedonic consumption is here to stay in India. As the choices available to the Indian Consumers grow, he is going to become more and more self-effacing, and start thinking about his own happiness. The study has defined hedonic consumption as those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of product use. The study has argued that this hedonic viewpoint represents an important extension of traditional consumer research and offers a complementary perspective for conceptualizing many otherwise neglected consumption phenomena.

It is clear from our survey and the subsequent analysis and results, that all our hypothesis are correct, and that there is an increasing tendency among the younger generations to satisfy their hedonic needs, and do that without any guilt feelings. The behavior of consumers, we believe, is far more sensorily complex, imaginative and emotion laden than has been reflected in the traditional approach to marketing research. The hedonic approach, while certainly no complete solution, may take us further toward comprehending the multiple facets of the consumption experience.

The Implications for the marketers are also very clear. They now need to concentrate much more on the psychological aspects, and at the same time use this opportunity to create more effective programs.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE SCOPE

The above study does come with a few limitations. Firstly the survey was restricted to only two age groups and hence results may not be completely universal in nature. Secondly the questionnaire designed was rather haphazard, and various scales were used to elicit responses. While this was good in getting a more comprehensive data, the different scales limited the use of statistical tools for the analysis. A uniform scale could have provided more in-depth analysis. Finally the choice of Post-Graduate respondents may have further declined the universal nature of this study, and a more varied respondent base might be needed to generalize the findings.

The Study also has further scope to be made bigger and used as a base for further research. One of the areas where further research could prove beneficial and increase our understanding is by studying the various age groups by adding more micro features and gaining a more thorough and comprehensive outlook. Further research could also be carried out as to the difference in perceptions between males and females regarding the satisfaction gaining process through use of Hedonic Consumption.

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