Culture in Transition

How 'global products' are changing user behavior

Peer M Sathikh

Assistant Professor, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University
81 Nanyang Drive, Singapore 637458

A. Senthil Kumar

Associate Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering
National University of Singapore, 9 Engineering Drive, Singapore 117576

Abstract

For the last quarter of a century, globalization and global market has been the central theme of both developed and developing economies. Globalization advocates such as Levitt [1] propagated the concept that a single worldwide market was the right way for prosperity and growth. This meant that product designers could be staying in any part of the world and design products whose hardware, software and firmware can be developed and manufactured at, often different, low cost centers and assembled together anywhere else for consumption in all parts of the world. Researchers such as Plocher and Honold [2] believed that the homogeneity of global culture, the similarity of thinking (in global products) and the cost increase in accommodating design nuances of foreign cultures into products would be good reasons for encouraging 'globally-oriented mass-produced goods' worldwide. The end of result of this is the numerous mobile phones, consumer goods, automobiles that look and function the same wherever it is sold.

How are people using these 'global products', especially in developing countries and how are they adapting to western culture specific and, predominantly, English language centric products? This paper sets out to show an interesting phenomenon that has been occurring in these regions of the world, where people, by adapting to these products are creating and finding new ways of using such products, creating a 'transitive culture' fusing new technology products, without major disruption of traditions, into their culture.

This paper illustrates the emergence 'transitive culture' in Asia, especially focusing on India, by documenting 'transitive behavior' changes due to the introduction of mobile phones and internet technology, in urban and rural areas. Such documentation, the authors, hope will pave the way for wider research in the emergence of 'transitive culture' in other countries due to the use of 'global products'.

Keywords: Globalization, global products, behavior, transitive culture

1.0 Introduction

The 'modern' phenomenon of globalization has its roots long back in history. MacGillivray [3] in his book, '*A Brief History of Globalization'* states that, 'many historians see 1492, when Christopher Columbus set sail in discovery of 'India' through the west, as the starting date of globalization'. According to MacGillivary [3], globalization started when the countries of the 'known world', such as England, Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, the Netherlands (Holland), etc., started craving for spices, with King Richard II of England even commissioning a recipe book titled *the Forme of Cury* in 1390. By late fourteenth century, Venetians monopolized spice trade through their history of land-based trade through the Middle East and the silk route to India and China. To break the monopoly of the Venetians, Spain and Portugal organized expeditions through the oceans to India and beyond, to the Malayan archipelago in the east, and to the Caribbean Islands in the west.

Abundance of spices and wealth in the discovered countries meant huge revenue, inspiring a number of North European countries to start companies to exploit the trade, such as *East India Company* (England), *Dutch East India Company* (Netherlands) and the French *Indian Oriental Company* (MacGillivary [3]). As a result, Europeans took with them, their lifestyle, culture, religion, language, habits and even, diseases to the 'new world' and were encountered by the same from the natives. End result was the cultural 'invasion' of the west into the east and the cultural 'infusion' of exotic products, habits, lifestyle from the east that slowly permeated into the west. Drinking tea, coffee or eating chocolates which are 'everyday' habits in many countries around the world today, were 'imported' from the 'new world' during the era of colonization. These are examples of changes in user behavior due to globalization that started in the 15th century.

Modern globalization has its beginning in 1947 with the signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), with the latest chapter in globalization signaled by two significant events that occurred at the end of the 20th century. The first occurred in 1989, when China, under Deng Xiaoping, liberalized their communist system and welcomed western companies to invest and start manufacturing operations. The second event occurred in 1991, when the then Indian Prime Minister, Narasimha Rao opened India to liberalized policies on foreign investment. In one stroke, two countries with a combined population of around 2.3 billion people became catalysts for a new 'globalized' world, where products and services can be produced at lower costs, far away from the country/place where the need for the products and services arise. Emergence of China and India into 'global economics' led Freidman [4] to anoint globalization as the new paradigm with the publishing of his seminal book, The World is Flat : A Brief History of the Twenty First Century.

With this new era in globalization, a new phenomenon known as 'global product' has emerged, where products are designed for a 'homogeneous' global population with meager or no effort put into testing if the product being designed will suit local use within the cultural and context of the user. This paper looks at how people of this globalization era in India are adapting to these pre-dominantly western centric 'global' products, especially mobile phones and the internet, and illustrate with some examples, the emergence of new 'behavior' and how it is contributing to 'transitive culture' in the already culture rich society.

2.0 'Global' markets and 'global' products

The authors find three interesting definitions for globalization that leads to the idea of a 'global' market first, and later leading to 'global' products.

The first by the Indian economist Amartya Sen who defines globalization as, *'a global movement of ideas, people, technology and goods from one region to others, benefiting the people at large'* [5].

The second is from Manfred Steger of Illinois State University, who says globalization is *'a multidimensional set of social process that create, multiply, stretch, and intensify worldwide social interdependencies and exchanges while at the same time fostering in people a growing awareness of deepening connections between the local and the distant'* [6].

The third, a comprehensive definition for globalization comes from the website globalization101.org, which states that '*globalization is a process of interaction and integration amongst the people, companies, and governments of different nations, a process driven by international trade and investment and aided by information technology. This process has effects on the environment, on culture, on political systems, on economic development and prosperity, and on human physical well-being in societies around the world'*.
(http://www.globalization101.org/What_is_Globalization.html?).

While Sen makes it simple by mentioning 'benefitting the people' in his definition, Steger goes slightly further by introducing 'social', 'interdependencies' and 'connections' in his definition. The third definition is comprehensive, by clearly stating the role of the people, companies, and governments and identifying the drivers of globalization as international trade, investments and information technology. It further states that globalization effects culture, the political system, economic development, prosperity and human physical well-being. While searching for the effect of globalization on culture and user behavior, which is the primary aim of this paper, one needs to identify the immediate outcomes of globalization over the last three decades.

Advocates of globalization such as Levitt [1] believed that a single worldwide market is the only way to go, by suggesting that 'the world has become a global market place, or a 'global village', where each and every consumer shares similar values, lifestyles and desires for product quality and modernity'. This according to Razzaghi, et al [7] is intended to homogenize and converge consumers' needs and tastes in order to create an infrastructure for unified marketing and for the selling of standardized products. Researchers such as Plocher and Honold [2] have taken this idea, of 'global market', to their advantage and presented the case for 'globally-oriented-mass-produced goods' believing that the homogeneity of global culture, the similarity of thinking and the cost increase in accommodating design nuances of foreign cultures into products would be good reasons for encouraging such 'global' products worldwide.

In a globalized world, global market seems to be the obvious outcome. Through the concept of global market, Zec [8] observed that globalization aims to provide greater similarity of perception and lifestyle as well as greater uniformity of product culture. In other words, globalization leads to global market, which in turn leads to global products. Fig 1 and Fig.2 show a popular global product, the Nokia E71 mobile phone.

Fig. 1 Nokia E71 from India   Fig. 2 Nokia E71 from Singapore

Both of them are the same product, except that the one in Fig.1 is assembled and sold in India, while the one in Fig 2 is assembled elsewhere (probably China) and sold in Singapore. Both have components that were imported from third countries together with parts from their respective countries. Otherwise, the shape, the colors, the finishes, display and user interface, all are identical to each other. Nokia E71 mobile phones bought in other countries, most probably, will look, feel and function identical as well.

Global products seem to focus only on the perceived 'similarity in thinking' of users, homogeneity of markets and standardization of parts and products, as advocated by the concept of globalization, missing the emotional and cultural backdrop against which the users perceive the products and make decisions to buy in different countries. Is this pointing to a 'global culture'? According to De Mooij [8], the inner layers of people's core cultures, values and attitudes, are deeply maintained and will continue to remain over time despite the preponderance of globally-marketed products and globalization. This would point to a fact that global products do not necessarily create homogenized behavior amongst people of different culture using such products. What then is the effect of global products on culture?

3.0 Mobile Phones in India – An Example
Mobile phone penetration in India, which started in mid 1995, stands at 362.30 million in January 2009, up from 233.63 million a year earlier. Combined with fixed line users, 34.5 percent of the population owns a telephone according to the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India. Most of this growth has been driven by laborers, maids,

drivers and other lowly paid people in cities and increasingly in rural areas as innovative marketing has made phoning cheap enough for some of the poorest pockets [9].

Visitors to India cannot miss noticing that, almost everyone is carrying a mobile phone. In a country with a rich tapestry of traditions, rituals, celebrations, art, dance and music, Indians seem to seamlessly blend their rich heritage, culture and traditions of thousands of years with the latest mobile communications culture in to their everyday life. Figure 3 to Figure 13 show mobile phones in the hands of diverse range of people in India.

Fig. 3 Mobile phones in India – heralding the future
(www.cleveland.com/world/index.ssf/2008/12/07-week/)

Fig. 4 Mobile phones in India (www.textually.org)
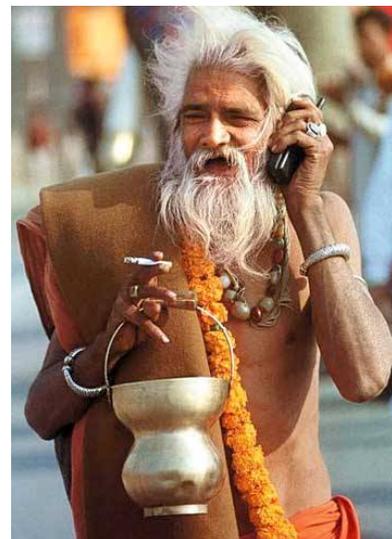

Fig. 5 Mobile phones in India (www.w3.org)

Fig. 6 Mobile phones in India (www.indiastudychannel.com)

Fig. 7 Mobile phones in India (www.zyozy.org)

Fig. 8 Mobile phones in India
(http://digitalmail.blogspot.com/2007_05_01_archive.html)

Fig. 9 Mobile Phones in India
(http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/
article6041440.ece)

Fig. 10 Mobile Phones in India
(http://alvins456.wordpress.com/2009/02/11/
indian-farmers-demand-more-mobile-phones/)

Fig. 11 Mobile Phones in India
(http://vaniviswanathan.files.wordpress.com/2007/
03/mobile-phone-in-india.jpg)

Fig. 12 Mobile Phones in India
(www.daylife.com/topic/Rajnath_Singh/photos)

Fig. 13 Mobile Phones in India
(www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2007
/09/21/stories/2007092150010100.htm)

How did such a technology driven product permeate throughout India in such a short period of 14 years ? "India represents a unique mobile market where competition is the highest and the tariffs are the lowest," says T.V. Ramachandran, head of the Cellular Operators Association of India. With 70 percent of the total population of 1.1 billion living in the rural areas, and with mobile phone operators trying to outdo each other to sell mobile phones together with the service package, mobile phone take up is expected to balloon in the coming years [9]

3.1 Mobile phones and user behavior in India

***"Indians* are now *using mobile* phones rather than bicycles for connectivity"**
Mr. Ashwani Kumar, Minister of State for Industries in a former government of India [10]

The word 'mobile' according to the Oxford English Dictionary was once used in association with the Latin phrase 'mobile vulgus', which means 'excitable crowd'. This sums up, in one phrase, the general behavior pattern associated with users of mobile phone in India today. Mobile phone introduces a new sense of speed and connectivity, delivering information straight into the hands of unprecedented numbers and varieties of individuals [11].

3.1.1 Urban mobile phone users

For the urban users, especially the youth, mobile phone is a 'necessity' and not a 'status symbol'. Mobile phone is used to connect with friends and family through voice calls and/or 'SMS' (short messaging service) [11]. Where they needed to go to get things done, such as buying grocery, repair / maintain cars or vehicles, urban users now want those things, such as the grocery being delivered or the mechanic picking up the vehicle, at where they are. The sense of urgency that was associated with getting things done has been replaced by a sense of urgency to connect with the correct people who can get it done on their behalf.

Of late, complaints of unacceptable surge in 'mobile nuisances' has been reported, with the Business Standard newspaper recently complaining, about Indian audience members 'who can often be heard chatting on their new handsets, discussing the plot as it unfolds on the screen'. Often given to talking loudly, to be heard over the din of the traffic and crowded environment, mobile phone also have to shout into the phone in order to make themselves heard, due to lessened clarity in mobile phone communication, since mobile infrastructure is stretched to accommodate more and more users [10]. Where, in the past, there was sanctity in temples, solemness in weddings, attentiveness in theatres and quiet sorrow in funerals, one hears chatter and loud conversation today in India. In response to a citizen's petition, the Committee on Petitions, an influential panel of the upper house of the Indian Parliament, the Rajya Sabha, suggests that annoying offenders should be sent to prison [10].

3.1.2 Rural Farmers

Prior to access of mobile phones in rural areas, prices for crops, milk and yields, were fixed by government agencies and private parties to their own advantage. Today, in rural villages, farmers use mobile phones to find the latest market price on products like coconuts, rice, jasmine and buffalo milk through their mobile phones rather than catching a bus 50 miles into town, making them market-savvy entrepreneurs. Indian farmers use camera-phones to snap pictures of crop pests, then send the photos by mobile phones to biologists who can identify the bug and suggest ways to combat it [12]. One of the service providers, Bharti runs a pilot project for farmers in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, providing voice and text tips on farming and animal husbandry and the availability of easy loans, and weather forecasts twice a day [13].

3.1.3 Fishermen

Fishermen use mobile phones in many ways. For one, almost all of them leave very early; around 0300 hrs in order to reach a good catchment area. Mobile phone comes in handy, in case the boat is in danger, to call back to the shore to reassure people or to call for help. Secondly, mobile phone offers business possibilities for fishermen. Today they can call several ports while still at sea to find the best prices, playing the dealers against one another to drive up the price[12]. The ports are also happy to have a fore warning of the coming boat load of fishes and how much they will have to pay for the consignment that is coming.

Thirdly, repairs to the boat have also become 'just one phone call away', whether they are in mid-sea or on shore. Mechanics can take a boat down or drive down, to attend to service calls. This saves the fishermen costly downtime leading to loss of livelihood. Fourthly, mobile phones allow captains of one fishing boat to call others in the vicinity to plan and strategize while fishing, enabling larger catch on most of their trips.

Finally, mobile phone allows fishermen to be in touch with each other and the coast guard to disseminate information and warnings about the weather and sea traffic. This helps in saving lives of many fishermen.

3.1.4 The 'religious' Indian and mobile phones

A considerable number of Indians believe in the power of destiny, horoscopes, auspicious times and special prayers (puja) has become a way of life. Indian read reports on their life, previous birth, years ahead, marriage, romance, career, business, finance, travel, health, speculation, child, progency, education, success, property/vehicle purchase and even gambling (www.askganesha.com). Cashing on this phenomenon today, private parties, including astrologers and priests, offer automated services that include SMS to tell the most auspicious time for starting things, which directions to head, prayer times, etc. With the 'horoscopes' at their finger trip, the 'neo-religious' Indians are able to reconcile traditional culture with the modern technology.

3.1.5 Mobile phone and romance

In a study done by University of Washington in Bangalore in 2006, the researcher found several instances where mobile phones played a role in romance [14] :

- In arranged marriages: A young man was given some time alone with a prospective bride-to-be and he had one question for her: "What is your mobile number?"

- Between working couples: One research participant often called or sent text messages to his wife, also living in Bangalore. If he lost his mobile phone he would be scared, he said, not because he had lost a phone but because he had lost this connection with his wife.

- Traditional etiquette: Indian mobile phone companies typically bill the person making the call. Men will occasionally ignore or hang up on a girlfriend and then call her right back, a modern instance of picking up the tab.

- Domestic spats: One partner might deliberately ignore calls to punish the other, or one might become angry when the other wasn't answering. In one instance a participant threatened his partner that he would not answer her calls for a month.

"The mobile phone makes it a little easier to facilitate an arranged marriage at a distance," the researcher from University of Washington, Carolyn Wei said [14]. She discovered instances where people used mobile phones to get to know partners vetted and approved by their parents. Mobile phones could influence the trend toward relaxing traditions on the amount of contact permitted before marriage, according to Wei [14].

3.1.6 Other uses for mobile phones

Here are some other uses for mobile phone in India, as listed in the website www.merinews.com [15] :

- Mobile phones are being used as TV remotes.
  If the phone has infrared port built into the phone, then with some software options, provided by local technicians in all cities, mobiles can easily be used as a TV remote.

- Mobile phones are replacing businesses of alarm clocks and watches. Apart from telling the time, mobile phones can be used as reminders for appointment as well.

- In a country prone to regular power cuts, mobile phone can also be used as a torch when there is no light. Nokia launched a special torch phone earlier in which had a torch at its head which became quite a hit.

- Rural laborers listen to FM radio through their mobile phones [16]

- Throughout India, mobile phone users give 'missed calls' to indicate that they would like the recipient to call back, thus saving on the charges for them in making that call. Coming to Indian rural users, some of them even have codes around a missed call, and they normally don't pick up the phone unless they know who it is from [17]

4.0 Culture in transition: Transitive Culture

For a country that is steeped in culture and tradition, languages and dialects, philosophy and culture, music and dance, rituals and practices, India seems to have adapted to mobile phone technology in a very short period of time. Sathikh and Senthil Kumar [19] describe this behavior of adapting a 'new' paradigm together with an existing one could be termed as 'transitive culture' which can connect, the past state with the present in a socio-cultural context.

The term 'transitive' borrowed from the Latin verb '*transire*' – to go beyond – defines a relationship with the past based on memory of events, objects and sensations that belong to not so distant histories, to the extent that they are remembered with affection but not with the emotion-laden nostalgia of 'mannerist revivals' [18]. This cultural transition, which includes creation of new cultural behavior, many a time connecting the past with the present state, could be termed as *Transitive Culture* according to Sathikh and Senthil Kumar [19]

Transitive Culture, in its broadest sense, *is behavior as it is being cultivated, or cultured, that connects the accumulated experience of the past with the present way of life influenced by artifacts and products of the technology era, which is being socially learnt and transmitted* [19].

5.0 Discussion

This paper sets out to highlight the phenomenon of 'transitive culture' that is emerging in India today, taking specific examples of the use of mobile phone in India. These examples are, by no means exhaustive, for the authors believe this is only the first level observation and premises for a future study and research into transitive culture. Full fledged research studies in the future will include setting up of research boundaries and methodologies that will suit research of this nature.

Culture, so far, has been studied as a method to exploit the sales and consumption side of products being designed, rather than to study how technology and products may affect culture and user behavior. Studies done in the past by Nokia, which may be viewed at www.janchipchase.com , and Motorola's study titled 'Effects of mobile telephones on social and individual life' at www.motorola.com/mot/doc/0/234_MotDoc.pdf, tend to focus only on documenting user practices towards designing brand new mobile phones, accessories, etc. Researchers, such as Subramanian [20], have looked at culture as a means to classify products to develop marketing strategies. Makkuni [21] has looked at 'how a technology, whether a computer, a vending kiosk, or an automobile can serve as an extension of cultural identity and expression, and in turn how ornamentation is an essential need'. A more relevant study has been done by Wei and Kolko [22] of University of Washington in their article *'Studying Mobile phone Use in Context : Cultural,*

Political and Economic Dimensions of Mobile Phone Use', where they look at how mobile phones are used in Uzbekistan, though the paper does not look at user behavior per se.

In this research into transitive culture, it is not the aim of the authors to influence the actual design of products and artifacts directly through this, nor are they interested in supporting or opposing globalization within the context of this study, since globalization, as a phenomenon, will take its own path of growth in the future. It is hoped that by observing, documenting, and setting up a basis for analytical framework for identifying and classifying instances of emergence of transitive culture due to globalization, a method of mapping and identifying trends can be evolved.

References

[1] Levitt, T. (1983), *'The Globalization of Market',* Harvard Business Review, Vol. May No. 1983, pp 92-102

[2] Plocher, T. and P. Honold (2000), *'Culturally-Adapted Product in the Global Market : Dealing with the Naysayers',* Paper presented at the CHI 2000, The Hague, Netherlands

[3] MacGillivray, A. (2006), *'A Brief History of Globalization,* Constable & Robinson Ltd., London, UK

[4] Friedman, Thomas A. (2005), '*The World is Flat : A brief history of the twenty first century',* Farrar, Straus and Goroux

[5] *'Embrace globalisation with vigour, says Sen'*, The Indian Express, February 21, 2001

[6] Steger, M., (2003), *'Globalization : a very short introduction'*, Oxford University Press, p13

[7] Razzaghi, M and M.Ramirez Jr. (2005), '*The influence of the designers' own culture on the design aspects of Products',* Paper presented at International Conference of the European Academy of Design, Germany

[8] Zec, P. (2002), 'Global Design & cultural Identity', Innovation, Summer 2002, pp. 34-38.

[9] *'Indian mobile phone market defying economic gloom'*, Taipei Times, March 09, 2009 (www.taipeitimes.com)

[10] *'When prison is just a phone call away: is this what future holds for mobile nuisances?'*, timesonline, April 6, 2009 (http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article6041440.ece)

[11] *'A Report on Study of Mobile Phone Usage Among the Teenagers and Youth in Mumbai'*, Market Analysis & Consumer Research Organisation (MACRO), April-May 2004 (http://www.itu.int/osg/spu/ni/futuremobile/socialaspects/IndiaMacroMobileYouthStudy04.pdf)

[12] '*For India's Traditional Fishermen, Cellphones Deliver a Sea Change*' **,** The Washington Post on line, October 15, 2006 (www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/14/AR2006101400342.html)

[13] '*India's Cell-Phone Ride Out of Poverty'*, businessweek.com, September 24, 2007 (http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/07_39/b4051058.htm)

[14] '*Mobile phones facilitate romance in modern India'*, uwnews.org, University of Washington, Feb, 12, 2007 (http://uwnews.org/article.asp?articleid=30477)

[15] '*Mobile phone and its various uses in India'*, http://www.merinews.com/catFull.jsp?articleID=139993, 26 Aug 2008

[16] '*Trunk Calls To Ringtones'*, Teheleka Magazine, Vol 6, Issue 19, May 16, 2009
(http://www.tehelka.com/story_main41.asp?filename=Bu160509trunk_calls.asp)

[17] '*Rural India calls'*, thehindubusinessline.com, September 21, 2007
(http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/life/2007/09/21/stories/2007092150010100.htm)

[18] Castelli, Clino T. (1999), *'Transitive Design : A design Language for the Zeroes'*, Electa, Milan, Italy

[19] Sathikh, Peer.M. and Senthil Kumar, A. , (2009), *'TRANSITIVE CULTURE: How'global' product designing is changing user behavior',* Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Integrity, Reliability and Failure, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

[20] Subramnian, Bala, (2001), *'Culture Based Product Classification In Global marketing For Competitive Advantage',* published in Global Competitiveness, 1 Jan 2001

[21] Makkuni, R. (2003), *'Culture as a Driver of Innovation',* Paper presented at ICHIM Paris 03, France

[22] Wei, C. and Kolko, B.E. (2005), *'Studying Mobile phone Use in Context : Cultural, Political and Economic Dimensions of Mobile Phone Use'*, IEEE International Professional Communication Conference Proceedings

[23] *'Indian among most addicted phone users'*, http://hubpages.com/hub/Indians-among-most-addicted-mobile-phones-users