

Consumer Culture: Global Media Influence on Local Society

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Abstract

Globalization is a developing process of complex interconnections between societies, cultures, institutions and individuals. With new media technologies, this process intensifies and diversifies on a larger scale; that is a global culture infiltrates into local cultures altering and transforming traditional cultures and national identities. The effect of globalized communication with new media technologies on local cultures raises many questions. For example, in Turkey, young people grow up and acquire the belief system of their local culture together with the values produced by the culture of the globalized media. While young people in Turkey identify themselves with global culture with the consumer things from the globalized media, they loose their connections with local. In order to investigate this contradictory situation, this paper will analyze global media and the effects of globalized media on consumer society in Turkey. With the help of a focus group study on university students in Istanbul, it will attempt to define if there is a possible struggle between the local culture and the global culture which spreads with globalized media and globalized commodities.

Introduction

Generally, globalization highlights the positive role played by the developed world in modernizing and facilitating sustainable development in underdeveloped nations. During the 1990s its initial focus was placed on the mass media as a modernizing force in the developing world. The mass media was viewed as integral to the diffusion of modern forms of social organizations and technology over traditional economies, with literacy playing a special cultural role in this. Globalization theorists also maintained that this would serve to promote a diffusion of liberal-democratic political ideals within less developed countries. However, some theorists such as Guy Debord (2006), Herbert Schiller(1993), Anthony Giddens (2000) criticize this position and claim that globalization distributed by new media is not for the benefit of developing countries but make them dependant on the developed world making this situation a 'global pillage' more than a 'global village'. Firstly this paper will analyze the concepts of global media and the effects of globalized media on consumer society in Turkey. With the help of a focus group study on university students in Istanbul, it will attempt to define if there is a possible struggle between the local culture and the global culture which spreads with globalized media and globalized commodities.

I. Global Media

Marshal McLuhan, a communication theorist, defines the instruments of communication, such as books, tools that leave no possibility of active participation in the communication process. Whereas, the television is a tool which provides participation in perception and interpretation phases regarding the communication, saving the humanity from its fragmentedness

and elevating it to a level of global village. We might say that this expectation of McLuhan who treats the phenomenon of communication in one dimensional level and reduces it down to a mere technological aspect has not turned out to be true. It will be quite right to name the global village which is pointed out under the veil of globalization as a global market formed by international firms who are producers of global products and their partners, and where their commodities are put to sale. Global market is a very significant phenomenon dominated by the capitalist world in terms of military, culture and politics. In other words, globalization is a global adventure of the capital (Alemdar-Erdoğan, 2005: 487). Therefore, globalization is not a phenomenon which has recently appeared, on the contrary, it is a process going on for centuries. Globalization is a phenomenon closely in connection with capitalist modernity and the expansion of capitalist system and relations of production. Of course, the incarceration of time and space, new formations of mass communication, financial transactions and gradually improving integrated world market are the novelties of globalizations. New technologies have altered the nature of labour, and the reality of cyber world has created new forms of information and entertainment and new free time opportunities. Along with these developments, the capital has revealed a brand-new techno-culture, and new forms of a society of entertainment and information. Yet at the moments, the social order is still being regulated by capitalist relations of production and the hegemony of the capital is playing a significant role on many aspects of social life (Kellner 1998). At the root of this homogenization lies the monopolization in the global press and cultural organizations. Global press market is under the domination of 10 transnational companies such as Time-Warner, Disney, Bertelsmann, Viacom, Tele-Communications Inc., News Corporation, Sony, Seagram, General Electric, Dutch Phillips. These global press, cinema, television programs, music records are made up of Western companies who influence not only the distribution but also the content in the press and, of course, of companies in the U.S.A. In these press companies, money is the only benchmark for everything. Developing countries such as Turkey, India or Brazil have no say in such a system. The slogan used by such transnational companies is "think globally, act locally". Therefore, globalization is a formation destroying local cultures and causing further inequalities in the world. It mostly carries the influence of American political and financial power and is prone to quite unequal consequences. Therefore, it would be much more correct to assert that globalization promotes global "pillaging" rather than creating a global village (Giddens, 2000:27). Although it demonstrates few distinctions depending on the region, these products linked to the global system are evaluated in terms of the profit they bring. Also, global media which complies with the requirements of the market tries to form a global consumption and a depoliticized society consisting of people with the goal of abiding by the rules. According to Boyd-Barret, one of the writers criticising this, it is a media imperialism; in other words, a process where the media property, content, structure and distribution of a country is suppressed for the interests of other countries (Alemdar-Erdoğan, 492). Herbert Schiller explains the present situation through the notion of "cultural imperialism" as "a body of processes where a society tempted, suppressed, forced and sometimes bribed into tailoring its dominant social layers to values and structures available in domination centre of the world system in order to draw that society into modern world system, and reforming its own social agencies to make these more powerful" (Tomlinson 1995: 154). According to Schiller, in a global capitalistic system, multinational media companies that inspect this system ideologically, and ensure that these multinational companies are promoted, spread and secure are quite significant. This multinational media plays a part as the extension of developed societies in undeveloped countries, and thus, the media becomes a marketing tool forming the audience into obedient consumers of capitalist order of production. This global media forms a worldwide "integrated and integrative" capitalist domination system with the help of tools such as press, publishing and advertising and of technological developments such as data procession, information technology and satellite broadcast. What is intended for the audience in developing

countries and Third World countries to adopt is the American lifestyle and consumerism (Tomlinson:65).

II. Theories on Consumer Culture

According to Veblen, who maintains that people are evaluated by their policies of envying each other in modern life and that hedonism and pomposity play a crucial part in understanding the modern order, tastes and trends are imposed by a capital owning, free time class upon the other parts of society. This idle class exempt from production and labor shows its distance from the labour by having a tendency to an envy-oriented consumption. This free time class distant from the daily life of labour consumes in an "envy-oriented" and even extravagant fashion to show off its financial power and boasts of that. This free timer class shows its non-labour aspects by dedicating its free time to dead languages, supernatural sciences, elaborate polished behaviour, sophisticated sports, deliberate housekeeping. To Veblen, social behaviour patterns of this free timer class indicating their privileged status consists of wide range of hobby lists, clothing, architecture, protection of old elements, notions of beauty and sports (Rojeck 1995: 47).

In Veblen's era, envy-oriented consumption was a tool for showing the laziness and measure wealth. While consumption gave certain ideas upon social communication, distinctions of class and income, the goods were gathered in a mimetic form in every level according to a class hierarchy from top to the bottom. The application of this situation to this day is the use of logos in clothes. Indeed, while the logos were inside the collar in clothes until the early 1970s, they are moved just on the clothes starting from the late seventies. Thus, everybody can see how much the owner of this cloth has paid and adjusted their behaviour accordingly (Klein 2002:50).

According to Bourdieu, who analyzed how the consumer goods are used to concretize the lifestyles of certain socio-economical classes and to distinguish these classes from other classes, "taste classifies". Choices of consumption and lifestyle contain discriminative judgements. Though they are exposed to change, imitation and copying, different styles, trends, goods constitute a series of hints in classifying others. There two different types of capitals creating such differences. One of these, being economic capital represents the entrepreneur groups saving the money and immovable property. In addition to economic capital, there is an intellectual capital formed by culture and education. By using the notion of symbolic capital, Bourdieu asserts that the origins of an individual can be understood by means of his/her manner of walking, weight, tone of voice and of comfort or discomfort with his/her body. In this regard, the culture can be read on the body, for instance, it is not importance which clothes are worn but how they are worn. In this respect patterns of expending not only reflects the structure of social inequality but also reproduces it. Having a suitable taste, wearing the right clothes and demonstrating certain behaviours are tools to maintain the success and therefore the membership within a privileged social group. Privileges use the activities of cloth and other consumption to maintain the consumption habits and their group identities and to improve their prestige (Featherstone 1995: 47).

With regard to consumption, Wolfgang Fritz Haug states that, in contemporary capitalism, people are exploited not only in production process but in consumption process also. Like Debord and Baudrillard, Haug also points out the significance of image and display in contemporary society and examines their sale efforts and its connection with capitalist political economy. Haug, who names the notion as illusion industry, which was referred to as culture industry by Horkheimer and Adorno, defines these instruments as instruments exploiting the needs of people, and legalizing the consumption capitalism. He discusses the commodity aesthetics integrating people to the lifestyles of consumption capitalism in this society. This notion includes the use of aesthetics in the sale, promotion, packaging, marketing and exposition of commodities. "Commodity Aesthetics" as defined by Haug, explains the exploitation of culture and daily life by the capital and the use of aesthetics to increase consumption. Therefore, while the consuming self finds the solution of all problems in shopping and consumption, the consumerism is the path to "good life" in contemporary capitalism (Kellner-Harms 1992) Indeed, many thinkers have made criticism of both modernism and the commodity culture, since it is providing the new consumption society and the propaganda this society needs. For instance, Debord has made this criticism as "The Society of the Spectacle" producing the culture of image, spectacle and commodities which ensures the maintenance of alienation and the suppression of reality. This notion explains that the society

of media and consumption is organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities and fictionalized events (Kellner 2003: 2-6).

Marcuse, one of the thinkers of critical theory, puts forward the notion of true needs and false needs. True needs are indisputable needs such as nutrition, clothing and accommodation. And false needs are needs that are imposed to the individual by social interests, needs that ensure the maintenance of overworking, aggression and inequality. Acting, having fun, consuming in the manner displayed in an advertisement, liking the things that others like or disliking what others dislike are false needs. Even if their satisfaction pleases the individual, these needs have a social function and are determined by powers other than the individual. "...no matter how much the individual associates himself/herself with these and how satisfied he/she thinks he/she is, they carry on being who they were right at the beginning-they are the products of a society the main interest of which requires that the people be suppressed". That's why, the happiness which the individual experiences in consuming these is "the happiness in unhappiness". Marcuse, stresses upon the falseness of satisfaction provided by the consumption culture in capitalist order (Tomlinson: 192).

Baudrillard, who analyzed the structures and fields of use of consumption society, has defined shopping centers, holiday resorts, airports, sites as consumption instruments in late 1960s which indicates that he understood the significance of the matter much earlier on. According to Baudrillard, consumption has become a social process ensuring the control and exploitation of labour in the workplace (Ritzer, 2000: 85). Stating that the commodities have the quality of building a reputation and of displaying social status and power and naming this as the indication value, Baudrillard has described modernism as an age of production controlled by industrial bourgeoisie and asserts that postmodernism is an age of "information and indications" controlled by modals, codes and cybernetics. In this age, the truth has been removed. In other words, the modals have replaced the truth and now what's left is a complete hypereality era. In the hypereality of media age, even the real things are real only when they are displayed on television (Hebdige, 1995: 82).

According to Baudrillard who equates consumption with the consumption of symbols and indicators, the sense of identity is no more a thing to be earned by being included in a certain economic class or status group, ethnic group or gender. Because, today, individuals form their senses of identity on their own. So according to Baudrillard, consumption is used by people to form their own identities through the things they buy. In other words, the individual forms such image and directs itself to the consumption of commodities just to create his/her own identity and to see himself/herself as he/she likes to. Consumption is based on an idea of deficiency. That's why, the individual never achieves complete satisfaction (Bocock, 1997: 74-75).

III. Research

In the application of part of the study, the effects of globalization on the consumption patterns of the Turkish youth are being determined through the use of focus group discussion which is a qualitative research method. In this context, the aim of the research is to reveal the position of consumption habits and patterns of respondents in Turkey in connection with global consumption products. The main group is the students of communication which will be the employees of media industry in the future. Sample group forming the focus group is designated to be 2 groups consisting of 9 students from İstanbul, Beykent and Yeditepe Universities. But, as is known, the results of the focus group cannot be attributed to the whole main group due to the insufficient numbers as in quantitative studies. The research, carried out under the supervision of a moderator, took 2,5 hours. During the discussion, different ideas were put forward through the questions of the moderator, and the group came to an agreement on all matters. Following are the conclusions within the scope of which were discussed during the research:

In Turkey, young people buy things not because they need it but due to competitive environment. According to the subjects, this competition in consumption in Turkey is present in all the fields including education. The subjects say "In the past, the neighbour's wife would buy a washing machine, but today, there are many more things to buy". This new kind of competition is the product of global popular culture. Young people make shopping under the influence of popular culture. According to young people who try to consume the products they see in television series, advertisements, magazines, these products are used as a status symbol.

The subjects state that the commodities spread by the global consumption culture are expensive and that they prefer to buy counterfeit products when they cannot buy the original. Since they get into long terms of instalments payment through loaning, they think people are appreciated by what they wear. The brand determines the identity of individual. Those who wear Levi's are labeled as upper class, and those who wear LeWaikiki as middle class (those who choose global brands assume the identity of upper class while local brands form the identity of lower class). Global brands are mostly preferred by young people: Stores producing clothing such as Nike, Adidas, Zara, Mango.

Popular culture spread by the global media is used for consumption. People use consumption products to win back the identity that they lost. There are models of personality whom everybody in the society takes as an example, and these are mostly the personalities within popular culture (popular stars from TV series: Lost, Heroes, Sex and the City, Alias, popular singers: Madonna, Hanna Montana, Fifty Sense facebook etc). Hairstyles, clothes, behaviour, cars, drinks they have, mobile phones etc. are become trends.

Young people state that the time spent in front of the computers has increased, and time spent outdoors has decreased due to new technological developments, and that this brings with it the more intense consumption of global products.

Conclusion

Consumption is an ideology which legitimizes capitalism in the daily life and actions of millions of people in Western societies and those who are not considered Western. In the West or in Turkey, it addresses the unconscious desires of the wealthy and the poor. As can be remembered, the desires of potential consumers have contributed to the upsetting of the balance of regimes in Eastern Europe. Displaying of consumption products by using these unconscious desires legitimizes capitalistic values and this gradually becomes a global phenomenon. In the application part of the study, a similar conclusion was reached. In Turkish society, young people are appreciated by what they wear and "the identity is filled with consumed products". As we can see in the examples in the West, the characters from American TV series become a role model for them and the products of companies sponsoring these TV series; cars, jewellery, clothes, phones they use are becoming trend consumption objects. Individuals who want to feel they are different in the society with all these products, gradually come to resemble each other with their manners of consumption which is on the level of mimesis.

Notwithstanding the presence of various commodities in capitalist consumption economy, the tendency to create a single world market revealed by the concentration in the economy spreads capitalism to anywhere in the world. Moreover, though cultural differences and autonomy are considered important today, the excuse given above leads to the formation of a homogenous consumption and media society inclinations, to standardisation of demands and actions, to consumption of much more American consumption products by gradually increasing number of people, to global standardization and homogenization. Therefore, the state we are in is not globalization which is associated with mutual relationships between several countries, but Americanization. Unfortunately, in developing countries like ours, the local opposition against Americanization almost does not exist. In other words, the struggle of the local against the global is getting even harder.

Today, though globalization seems to be using local identities, it does this by exaggerating these, in other words, putting the local identities forwards more than ever. Transnational culture industry is directing the cultural policies and differences of local identities and exploiting for the sake of sales. Indeed, globalization requires a sufficient number of consumers ensuring the maintenance of large scale companies. To provide that number, advertisements and promotions must be addressing to the desires of consumers. Application results of the study also confirm this fact. The subjects who say that globalization is closely connected with consumption, also explain with examples that Turkey has become a part of this situation, that local culture has been turned into cash by international companies under the pretence of globalization. Everybody agreed that globalization is a new social formation that takes the local cultures, turns them into cash and presents them to people back. In addition to that, examples were given such as McDonald's putting coke into the glasses instead of water in the Ramadan commercial and Burger King introducing a Ramadan Menu.

Also another striking conclusion of the research is that the thing which determines the quality of life for young Turkish people is money instead of spiritual values such as health, happiness or love. In

other words, it is how much the individual can consume. Subjects who pointed out that appearance is given much significance, have said that it is very important for them to adapt this society: “I prefer to be in control in the society in which I live, instead of being suppressed. I prefer to be the one who runs the machine. I accommodate myself to anything that the present order brings”.

Today, when it is a habit to fill one's life with commodities, the easiest way to achieve that is to form the syndrome of competing with others. Also, since the competition is carried out by tangible commodities today, people prefer working more in order to have access to these commodities. Though this development follows the same historical process everywhere, it most commonly does so in third world countries like Turkey. The application also revealed that Turkish people consider pretentious consumption important and that they are in rivalry with their neighbours or friends. Moreover, to these reference groups taken for consumption (neighbours, friends) new ones added (fashion magazines, pop stars, TV characters), as mentioned above. And Turkish people who consume more and more everyday thanks to the increase in loan facilities, cannot free themselves from the classical story of consumption culture which is "work and spend", "spend and work".

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