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Markets, Globalization & Development Review



Confronting the Postmodern Intersection of Markets, Development, Globalization, and Technology: The Necessary Radical Vision of Nikhilesh Dholakia

Influenced by the lifelong commitment of his father to an India freed from postcolonial forces, Nikhilesh learned from a young age that his father's activism in India's freedom struggle needed to widen to an international influence that could change the world, both globally and locally (Dholakia 2019). Over the ensuing years, Nikhilesh's commitment to and passion for a just world has remained undimmed. His writings and teaching have consistently cast a critical eye on the market operations underlying technology-driven globalization, in which development is the overarching goal. In Nikhilesh's sophisticated view, such a goal expresses neoliberal state models, and is far from beneficial to the day-to-day lives of a global citizenry.

Nikhilesh has advanced incisive debates on globalization, development, and marketing dynamics; his clarion call for researchers to embrace a critical mindset has encouraged openly revisionary interdisciplinary permeability, theoretical openness, dialectic challenges, and the recognition of paradoxes, all in service to the goal of *emancipatory and transformational futures* (Dholakia 2012 p. 222).

As co-editor-in-chief of *Markets, Globalization, & Development Review* (MGDR), in collaboration with Deniz Atik, Nikhilesh presents conflicting views, colliding philosophies, and conflictual processes as necessary to approach key questions to the discipline, and to truly access the roots of complex problems lurking within markets, globalization, and development realities. He remains unfazed that these necessary radical perspectives may clash with the abundant literature expressing schools of thought that dominate business schools and are aligned with maintaining a conceptual and practical neoliberal status quo.

In its freedom from prevailing business school ideologies, Nikhilesh's work offers trailblazing theories and arguments that radically break with the past: his prolific productivity, leading to some 8,500 citations as of October 2021, positions him as one of the most influential authors in the interrelated fields of critical marketing, consumer culture, and electronic markets.

The Transformational Influence of Collaboration

“Kotler at one point said, “Oh, you two, (...) you remind me of, and you are likely to become, the Sidney and Beatrice Webb of India.” I really look up to Sidney and Beatrice Webb. Things like that, those were kind of a transformative influence.” (Nikhilesh Dholakia, interviewed by Annamma Joy, October 2021).

As Nikhilesh has written, his doctoral years at Northwestern University in Chicago were crucial not only in laying the foundation of his career in academic marketing, but also in building a critically contrasted body of knowledge. While mentored by significant scholars in marketing, such as Philip Kotler and Sidney Levy, Nikhilesh also found inspiration in discussing social and ideological issues with international students across disciplines (Dholakia 2019). These truly enriching cross-disciplinary dialogues continue to manifest in his work, as thought-provoking concepts that challenge both new and seasoned readers to go beyond their disciplines and plunge into deep, cutting-edge concepts in the social sciences.

During the crucial years of his early education, Nikhilesh crossed paths with Ruby Roy, now Ruby Roy Dholakia, with whom he has co-authored some of his most cited articles. Together, the husband-and-wife team has explored their common interests on a variety of topics relating to e-commerce, social marketing, and development (Dholakia and Dholakia 2001); the two routinely seek conceptually advanced horizons. Since the early days of their collaboration, they have offered a groundbreaking challenge to the prevailing assumption of choice in consumer behavior and mainstream marketing management. They reveal the capitalist ideological underpinnings of this assumption, based as it is on the quasi-freedom to consume from an actually limited range of branded options – those backed by capitalist values. The Dholakias have investigated consumer sovereignty, proposing that the lack of choice (choicelessness) entails a concept key to explaining consumer behavior; through this perspective, neoliberal capitalist ideology impedes the truly advanced marketing knowledge that allows for actual social change (Dholakia and Dholakia 1985). This impediment is even more pervasive in today’s hyper-digitalized marketplaces, where choice overload across e-commerce sites not only exacerbates the experience of “available free-choice options”, but also can

trap consumers in an overwhelming, paralyzing situation of choicelessness (Dholakia et al. 2021). Nikhilesh and Ruby Roy Dholakia have established challenging debates that, if embraced by mainstream marketing academics, could have precipitated major paradigm shifts beginning in the 1980s, and could still lead to such shifts today.

“Fuat [Firat] and I hit it off instantly, as friends and as professional colleagues. Our research collaboration has lasted over forty-six years and continues to remain strong” (Dholakia 2019 p. 381).

Dholakia’s first meeting with the marketing scholar Fuat Firat during their respective Ph.D. years was the beginning of a life-long friendship that has thus far yielded a three-part series of avant-garde articles on postmodernism and marketing; the series stands among Nikhilesh’s best work, and comprises his three most cited pieces. The cornerstone of his critical work was developed in collaboration with Firat, and delves into the ideological depths of postmodernity in the context of marketing.

Understanding Globalized Marketplace Values through Postmodern Theoretical and Philosophical Lenses

The most recent version of globalization arrived in tandem with the postmodern era, which is in essence a marketing-driven era. Marketing actions have effectively reflected postmodern values to adapt to consumers’ demands for social change, while becoming facilitators of postmodernism. However, often, marketing theory has remained linked to modern propositions, by focusing on product development or consumer sovereignty (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Dholakia and Firat 2006). It is no coincidence that Nikhilesh’s most cited works clearly explain how the main axioms of postmodernism characterize current marketing.

The co-authoring team of Dholakia and Firat has made comprehensible to marketing scholars the change from the prism of modernity, where the legitimization of knowledge is given through cosmopolitan meta-narratives directed towards a universal civic identity thanks to the model-elements, as common images of consumption (Debord 1968), towards embracing all differences, making a highly fragmented reality poised to be segmented (Firat and Dholakia 2006). In the current hyper-communicated postmodern society, numerous genres of discourse are distinguished that represent various social realities, going beyond the network of signs and social meanings established in the modern relationship between subject-object and consumption (Baudrillard 1968). Thus, globalization has given rise to a context rife with new cultural

interpretations and diverse scenarios in the construction of different consumer identities, rather than a homogeneous landscape of globally uniform consumers (Geertz 1983). Firat and Dholakia have been able to capture the relationship between these philosophical shifts in social sciences and marketing throughout their analyses. They have revised the path of postmodern consumers towards symbolic needs, the naturalization of subcultures that make sense to those needs through the consensual simulation of *hyperreality*, and the blurry or *decentered* lines between object and subject relations where these become potentially interchangeable due to the active role of consumers as producers of experiences that they themselves consume (Firat, Dholakia, and Venkatesh 1995; Firat and Dholakia 2006).

Technology and Globalization

“So, we [Ruby and I] realized that you cannot understand this [e-commerce] field by just looking at the US or Canada or places like that, you have to look much more globally, to understand how technology is evolving.” (Nikhilesh Dholakia, interviewed by Annamma Joy, October 2021).

It is undeniable that information technologies have greatly influenced postmodern markets' domination of physical and digital spaces. E-commerce has led to a contraction of space and an acceleration of time, which has helped to reshape our world as a large global village of consumption (Bauman 2007). The growth of virtual information and of shopping tools and platforms, and of their intensive use by consumers, has been a fruitful field of analysis for Nikhilesh and Ruby Roy Dholakia. As pioneers in this area of knowledge, both have devoted significant scholarship to the analysis of e-commerce.

From very early on, there have been a few key identified and emerging topics related to electronic *marketspaces*. Nikhilesh and Ruby Roy Dholakia, and their associates, have addressed the interactivity of consumers as website users in the early years of computer-mediated communications (Dholakia et al. 2000), investigated the gender gap in internet usage (Dholakia, Dholakia, and Kshetri 2003), and studied how mobile commerce differs from e-commerce (Dholakia and Dholakia 2004).

Moreover, Nikhilesh has proposed advanced theoretical propositions regarding marketing theory and technology from soft-determinist positions that place technology as an essential factor, along with politics, culture, and the economy, in the interaction with and the reasons for social changes (Dholakia, Zwick, and Denegri-Knott 2010). Technology

has allowed the optimization of all the processes that lead to successful marketing mixes; more importantly, it has changed relationships with customers at many levels. Important contributions on how consumer identity has been created are based on the use of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) databases. In this new marketing management derived from data mining, new binary languages based on consumers' online actions provide descriptions of consumers' profiles that consumers themselves are not aware of, and quite possible would not even identify with if they were aware of them (Zwick and Dholakia 2004a; Zwick and Dholakia 2004b). At the heart of these new consumer relationships is the fundamental issue of a lack of customer privacy – a matter of civil rights that brings government regulations to the forefront of technology and market debates (Zwick and Dholakia 2001). All these elements represent a rhizomatic complex system of relationships that hide cultural significances and variations of neoliberal ideologies in the intersection of technology and markets.

In this postmodern context characterized and driven by consumption and economic relations without physical boundaries, the technological society has provided an appropriate niche for the development of a network of international economic relations on which the phenomenon of globalization rests. When a transnational meeting of cultures occurs in these complex situations, in which technologies are developing at great speed, the cultural changes necessary to maintain balanced and beneficial intercultural relations for all members of global pluralism, however, simply do not occur (García-Canclini 2001).

Development Focus: How to Bring to the Table the Non-Aligned Countries and Perspectives

“The motivation for the [ISMD] conference was to look at the field of marketing from angles other than just the developed nations, that we have to look at the developing nations and the issues there. (...) I think bringing those issues of representation of the non-represented to the front (...) has a socially useful purpose.” (Nikhilesh Dholakia, interviewed by Annamma Joy, October 2021).

From the social sciences, a dialectical vision of local and global realities has been proposed, in which different ethnic groups and global cultures, rather than being contradictions to globalization, are instead precisely complementary elements that help to enrich this globalized reality.

This coexistence of both local and global realities occurs not only in the cultural sense, but also in the sense of a new social stratification, in which the driving forces of globalization and localization create a new polarization of the world population, "globalized rich consumers" and "localized poor consumers" (García-Canclini 2001). Markets and marketing systems have an undeniable responsibility to address the unequal distribution and segregation of these realities. These phenomena are inseparable from the postmodern ways of colonization found in the westernization of global communication structures concentrated in the West, and particularly dominated by the United States, and accordingly have given rise to an imperialist western consumer culture.

Since the beginning of his marketing studies, Nikhilesh has been well aware of this "Westernization" or "Americanization", which, coupled with the misrepresentation of non-Western and non-Anglo-Saxon cultures, often dominates not only global media but also mainstream marketing academia (Dholakia, Firat, and Bagozzi 1980). Nikhilesh's sustained and deeply committed effort to examine marketing's role in promoting unequal development around the world has informed a number of his published articles and the overall ethos of the MGDR contributions (see Quattromini 2022, for a recent example). Nikhilesh has consistently brought a critical eye and global perspective to the consequences of world dynamics on investments and aid flows between western and eastern blocks, as well as non-aligned countries (Dholakia and Dholakia 1982). Further, he regularly offers updates on this topic, e.g., with his analysis of the retailing landscape in India as a transitional market, and on the barriers to SMEs (small to medium enterprises) that India faces (Dholakia, Dholakia, and Chattopadhyay 2012; 2018)

In line with its ethos, MGDR invites contributions that explicitly address market systems' structures that affect these globalized development issues. Co-Editors-in-Chief Dholakia and Atik welcome contextual studies on development, and are also open to radical approaches able to confront the capitalist state of affairs, as well as studies that historically review non-capitalist or quasi-capitalist forms of exchange (Dholakia and Atik 2016). Rather than solicit studies incorporating development analyses based on growth assumptions or on redistribution, they invite researchers to uncover the missing links in marketing practiced in emerging countries, and specifically those key aspects that focus on *community-based efforts, collective self-reliance, respect for culture and the eco-system, non-alienating means of production, and overall, mutual help and cooperation structures* (Dholakia and Dholakia 2014 p. 68). Such outreach has resulted in a journal that overtly invites readers to *rethink*

everything via studies incorporating the unfiltered tangible and ideological realities of emerging countries' social changes and market systems.

Without Fear of Rethinking Everything

“From various fields, medical all the way to business, to social sciences, people are analyzing and interpreting and to some extent speculating about the post pandemic futures. (...) Status quo in some modified form will continue or people [will] seize the opportunity of this tragic pandemic to make ameliorative changes.” (Nikhilesh Dholakia, interviewed by Annamma Joy, October 2021).

The pandemic has shaken the very foundations of the world order — markets, globalization, and development — which far from coincidentally are the primary foci of MGDR. The Journal seeks to introduce changes in consumption practices and lifestyles, encourage new ways of communication through information technologies, reintroduce de-globalization debates to the public arena, and show that post-pandemic scenarios can evolve from catastrophic to a temporary awakening to the consciousness of neoliberal bonds. MGDR editors anticipate changes in the techno-economic, politico-cultural, and socio-communal levels of society, and that active and activist orientations will be necessary to advance towards ameliorative positions, instead of sleepwalking into regressive scenarios (Dholakia and Atik 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; see also Atik, Dholakia, and Ozgun 2022, forthcoming). Where is marketing's voice, and what is its responsibility, in this dilemma?

In his exploration of the intersections of marketing and postmodernity, Nikhilesh has incorporated radical Foucault theory as it relates to marketing positions. He brings to the fore the ideological force of postmodern marketization in the displacement of all public institutions, which now largely function around neoliberal competitive rules (Özgün, Dholakia and Atik 2017). Nikhilesh further reveals that marketing has been a necessary accomplice of neoliberal politics that have left states with little to no powers of decision, along with their privatized institutional structures. Under the same logic, he points out those marketing processes that could attain the privileged position of contributing to the reversal of the current situation of neoliberal hegemony by going back to the historical basis of macromarketing, which provides the means to address provisioning market-system challenges. MGDR editors and contributors problematize the political discourse of the free market: they dethrone consumers — from the false pedestal of 'sovereignty' — by liberating them from neoliberal ties,

revitalize practices of cooperativism, and invite both academics and practitioners to rethink marketing research, managerial decisions, and actions (Dholakia, Özgün and Atik 2020).

In light of recent events, Nikhilesh has expressed his interest in topics ranging from analysis of the rise of populism and the death of democracy, to the study of forms of retro-development; the Journal also features media reviews of noteworthy films and books. As advice for neophyte authors, he offers a call to action: *“So, enter the conversation (...) and then hopefully you'll get inspired to do more.”* (Nikhilesh Dholakia, interviewed by Annamma Joy, October 2021).

Throughout his work over the years, Nikhilesh has brought persistence and passion for those radical views and voices that defy established neoliberal theories and ideologies. He remains hopeful of finding cooperative solutions among international scholars who are unafraid to question capitalist dogmas. A noticeable insight – seeing the limits of social institutions that embrace the rules of the neoliberal and contemporary markets – illuminates all his editorials and articles. Such insight can only motivate both young and more seasoned authors to step off the beaten path and feel compelled to contribute to innovative proposals. As a co-editor-in-chief and author, Nikhilesh invites the reader to observe the kaleidoscopic network of globalized marketplaces to better understand the key components of new global orders. Looking towards complex social horizons, promoting authentic academic dialogues on the tensions between markets, development, and schools of thought in marketing and social sciences, Nikhilesh brings a wealth of insight, knowledge, and critical discernment to our understanding of marketing's impact on global social structures.

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