



Waves of Virtual Consumption among Contemporary Iranians: A Critical Cultural Analysis within the Context of Consumption Studies Paradigms

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Abstract

As a cultural phenomenon, consumption is one of the key concepts for understanding modern societies, because modern man's lifestyle, aesthetic taste and desires are strongly dependent on his/her cultural consumption. A literature review in the tradition of consumption studies demonstrates that at least three paradigm shifts in consumption theories have taken place: Consumption as a passive act, consumption as a communicative act, and consumption as an act of resistance. As a consequence of these paradigm shifts, the practice of consuming cultural commodities has become the focus of attention in Cultural Studies with an emphasis on the discussion of this practice. With this epistemology at hand, the present paper situated itself within the context of consumption studies paradigms to explain contemporary Iranians' consumption behavior within the cyberspace known as "virtual consumption", which is of cultural and ideological significance for cultural analysts. Accordingly, the three waves of virtual consumption theorized by Lehdonvirta (2009) were reframed into the Iranian context to see if and to what extent there exists a correspondence between them.

Keywords: Cultural consumption, virtual consumption, contemporary Iranians, discursive practice

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Introduction

Review of literature on consumption studies demonstrates that following an epistemological turn in consumption studies, the term consumption has undergone a conceptual and semantic leap to be assumed not only an economic, but also a cultural phenomenon. Accordingly, consumption theories in the field of Cultural Studies have shifted from material to cultural commodities (including movies, fine arts, media, etc.). Under this new epistemological turn, consumption is viewed to be the key to understanding modern societies, because modern man's lifestyle, aesthetic taste and desires are subject to this cultural variable. For this reason, in the book *Consumer Culture and Modernity*, Slater (1997) views cultural consumption as a requirement for the modern world in parallel with the spirit of the modernity. Moreover, the tradition of consumption studies has witnessed three paradigm shifts for the critique of consumption: Consumption as a passive act, consumption as a communicative act, and consumption as an act of resistance (Story, 1999; Douglas & Isherwood, 1996; Fisk 1998).

In his seminal book *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life*, Story (1999) differentiates between cultural consumption as manipulation and cultural consumption as communication, and discusses the various consumption theories under these two paradigms. According to him, the first paradigm includes the theories that postulate consumers as passive and consumption as a practice of manipulation by the discourse of power. On the basis of this paradigm, passive consumers reinforce the existing structures and order of hierarchy. Hence, the critical tradition of Frankfurt School belongs to this paradigm. In the second paradigm, consumption is viewed as a symbolic medium for communication as well as an identity forming discourse through which consumers produce and diffuse meanings in the public sphere. For example, they can imply the idea that they belongs to a specific

class or discourse in the society. Douglas and Isherwood (1996) and Bourdieu (1984) are the precursors of this paradigm. Finally, in the third paradigm, consumers are regarded as active agents who practice a resistance through consuming a specific commodity. Such consumers openly challenge the rules and requirements of the dominant discourse. As an example, when consuming TV programs, an active subject can resist against its ideological meanings to create his/her intended meanings. Fisk (1998) and the new generation of consumption studies scholars belong to this paradigm. In what follows, an attempt is made to situate the discursive practice of virtual consumption by the contemporary Iranians within the context of these three paradigms.

Statement of the Problem

One of the discursive practices that has recently been attended by cultural analysts is “virtual consumption” which is of cultural and ideological significance. The related literature is replete with multiple studies on virtual consumption as an economic and technological category, but research on virtual consumption as a cultural phenomenon has just recently been the focus of attention by the scholars of consumption studies/cultural studies. Among them, a mention can be made of studies by Lehdonvirta (2009) and Molesworth and Denegri-Knott (2013). In a seminal research entitled as *virtual consumption*, Lehdonvirta (2009) explores the cultural history of virtual consumption under three major waves: 1) Online shopping wave, 2) Pro-consumption wave, and 3) Virtual consumption wave.

The first wave of virtual consumption according to Lehdonvirta was launched in the mid-1990s following a public inclination to the online shopping of material goods from virtual stores. This wave is consistent

with the paradigm of cultural consumption as a manipulation, since the consumers were passive subjects whose choices and preferences were manipulated and intervened by the discourse of power (the capitalist system) and there was no resistance by them. Therefore, their cultural and aesthetic taste and even their dreams and fantasies were constructed by the discourse of power. In this wave, the web 2.0 (the interactive web) had not yet been introduced, and it was not possible for the producing and consuming subjects to interact with each other within the virtual space. Accordingly, virtual consumption in practice led to the reinforcement and strengthening of the capitalist discourse. The reason for making this argument is that as a totalitarian and repressive system, capitalism represses the real desires, preferences and choices of consuming subjects and thus subjugates them by manipulating their real needs and imposing on them the consumption of commodities that are not in accordance with their agency and subjectivity. Henceforth, the first wave of virtual consumption takes up the political nature of desire by subjecting people to the rules and codes of capitalism. Thus, this wave is consistent with the paradigm of cultural consumption as an act of manipulation by the discourse of power.

The second wave of virtual consumption launched following the emergence of web 2.0 (the interactive web). Unlike the first wave, this wave emancipated the consuming subjects from a mere passivity and subjugation and, contributed to their empowerment. Consequently, instead of consuming digital contents passively, virtual consumers in the second wave actively made consumption a discursive practice with a degree of resistance. In other words, concurrent with virtual consumption, they proceeded with virtual production called as “User-generated content” (UGC). Because of this double function, virtual consumers in this wave can be termed as “prosumers” in the sense that they immediately turn their consumption into an act of production. In other words, it is a resistance-oriented or productive

consumption. Thus, this wave is consistent with the paradigm of cultural consumption as an act of resistance.

The third wave of virtual consumption broke out following the ever-increasing development of applications and social platforms including Facebook, Instagram and so forth. In this wave, which is still in progress, all of the three paradigms of consumption are concurrently at work. On the one hand, the companies that are producing virtual commodities (contents), are tacitly incorporating ideological meanings in them. On the other hand, the consumers of these commodities are critically consuming them and thus alternatively self-expressing and redefining their identity. There are, however, some passive consumers as well as those who do not have an adequate critical literacy on the way the mechanisms of the capitalist system are at work. For them, virtual consumption can be a communicative act through which they can signal certain meanings about their class consciousness. Accordingly, the third wave of virtual consumption can be seen as a fuzzy state where passive and active consumers co-exist.

The emergence of this new consumption spaces has no doubt augmented the degree of subjectivity and the agency of the consumers in making real choices of their own. Thus, consumption of virtual space has brought to the fore the dialectics of symbolic castration and subjectivity which is a concern with critical theory and cultural studies. On the basis of this problematic, the current paper discusses the practice of virtual consumption by the contemporary Iranians and its socio-cultural implications in a bid to shed light on some invisible aspects of the Iranian culture. As a point of departure, it should be pointed out that most studies by Iranian scholars on virtual consumption of the contemporary Iranians revolve around its economic functions, or the ethical and negative impacts of having access to porn websites or the policy of filtering in Iran. It goes without saying that the socio-cultural impacts of virtual consumption are

more profound than the aforementioned politico-economic impacts, which have been overlooked in the Iranian academic discourse.

Research Questions:

On the basis of the above-mentioned gap detected in the virtual consumption studies by the Iranian scholars and in order to give voice to this silent zone and problematize it within the Iranian academic circles, the following questions are formulated.

- Q1: What impacts has virtual consumption left on the self-subjectivity of the Iranians?
- Q2: What impacts has virtual consumption left on the affective, emotional and aesthetic taste of the Iranians?
- Q3: What impacts has virtual consumption left on the traditional culture of the Iranians?

The last but not the least is the following central question:

- Q5: How can the behavior of virtual consumption by the contemporary Iranians be analyzed according to the consumption studies paradigms?

Research Design and Methodology

To approach the research questions, this theoretical study undertakes a systematic review of the descriptive material with the purpose of presenting a theory-driven analysis of the contemporary Iranians' virtual consumption. In agreement with this approach, the totality of the Iranian contemporary culture is approached with all due respect

to the fact that some social variables such as education, age, income, occupation, status, etc. may influence the way the virtual tools are consumed and understood by the Iranian people from all walks of life. None of these variables are taken independently, because the focus of this study is the general developments in the Iranian culture in the wake of virtual consumption. It is aimed at presenting a merely qualitative analysis of the Iranian-style experience of virtual consumption, because no reliable quantitative data and official statistical figures was found to support the descriptive analyses.

Waves of Virtual Consumption among Iranians with Respect to Consumption paradigms

An analysis of the waves of virtual consumption in Iran shows that unlike the global pattern of virtual consumption discussed in the theoretical framework, Iranian-style virtual consumption waves have not followed a linear pattern, but rather they have been circularly reproduced within the context of the Iranian culture. As an example, the wave of online shopping in Iran broke out following the two other waves. To elaborate on this reverse pattern, it is necessary to have a historical view and background on the digitalization of culture in Iran. To begin with, internet was introduced to Iran just one year after its birth in the 1990s, but it took at least a decade for the internet to influence the Iranian public sphere and to have a contribution in the development of the Iranian style of modernity. It was in the first decade of the third millennium that the first wave of virtual consumption by Iranians broke out in the public sphere of the country in forms like news writing, news reading, blogging, wiki writing, sending and receiving emails, internet chats, listening to songs, watching images, films, video clips, digital games and searching for various public and specialized websites, and then the “Iranian virtual communities” took shape. This wave of consumption which is consistent with the

pro-consumption wave and with the two paradigms of “cultural consumption as an act of resistance” and “cultural consumption as an act of communication”, led to the production of new social relations and identities among the Iranian people. As a consequence, the identity of the Iranian people (first at the level of the elites and then at the level of the pup culture) came to the threshold of a radical development. For example, concurrent with the spread of internet chats and sending/receiving emails among the educated Iranians, the traditional pattern of social relations among Iranians shifted from face-to-face analogue communications to virtual communications.

As Fazeli (2017, p. 483) has pointed out, diversification in social relations through email correspondences, internet chats and access to various websites and blogs from across the globe expanded the Iranian people’s social life and global identity and as a consequence, the virtual communities of Iranians became a site for a new intercultural experience.

Although the first wave of virtual communication in Iran was limited to the educated and middle class families, in the following decades, when the internet penetration rate in Iran soared and the digital divide between city dwellers and village dwellers reduced, virtual communication in Iran lost its class-based disposition and was redistributed in a more democratic way among all walks of life including the villagers, nomads, women, children, and the youth. According to the Iranian Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (2018), the number of internet users in Iran from the year 2000 up to 2017 reached from 250 thousand to 56 million and 700 thousand people. This means that in the year 2000, only 3.8 percent of the Iranian population were internet users, but it reached 70 percent in the year 2017. This made a big contribution to the development of the Iranian modernity, because the traditional culture of Iran used to force the women and children to reproduce the dominant phallogentric /patriarchal values and relations, but in the virtual

communities, they could challenge the society's official narrative about the social identity of the Iranian people and produce instead their intended self-identity. Indeed, they produced a counter narrative about their self-identity. Children and women managed to access a variety of western discourses about women rights, citizenship rights, sexual and medical issues, which were never accessible for them. Apart from gaining sexual awareness, they achieved a critical self-consciousness. This awareness reinforced the desire to redefine the feminine identity within the context of the Iranian contemporary culture. Consequently, Iranian women (or a group of Iranian women) who were faced with limitations, enjoyed a relative freedom on the virtual space. They experienced such modern phenomena as internet friendships, relationships with the opposite sex, internet marriages, online sexual health education, sex therapy, and sex counseling. Talking about these issues in the past was considered as a red line, not being tolerated whatsoever, but they were discussed more openly in the virtual communities of Iranians. Therefore, the first wave of virtual consumption of Iranians is consistent with both paradigms of "cultural consumption as a communicative act" and "cultural consumption as an act of resistance", because through virtual consumption, Iranian women openly challenged the rules and requirements of the dominant discourse and viewed virtual consumption as a symbolic medium through which they could produce and diffuse their intended meanings. In their personal blogs and home pages, they shared their feminine experience, emotions, feelings, images and memories with others. Thus, they became more visible across the globe.

In the first wave of virtual consumption by Iranians, the digital divide between the parents and their children and also between traditional and modern families was too deep, but in the following waves, it gradually minimized. What is significant in this wave from the perspective of cultural studies is that virtual consumption by Iranian children in practice deepened the value gap between

the generations. Since the new generation that spent most of their time on consuming digital games, songs, images audio-visual files, web surfing, blogging etc., had no more time for dialogue and interaction with their parents. This has led to the medialization of the contemporary Iranian culture, because the traditional immediate and face-to-face interactions are now being replaced with mediated interactions thanks to the modern digital technologies. The outcome of this mediatization does not evidence itself just in the form of a generation gap, but rather the emotions and passions of the Iranian people also are becoming mediatized. This can be easily found in the family and familial reunions.

When consuming virtual commodities, the new generation of Iranians shows less resistance against the production of cultural meanings that are inconsistent with the traditional values of the society. Instead of spending their time on learning such traditional skills as cooking, sewing, and embroidering and the like, they generally spend their time on learning digital skills and digital consumption. This value gap between the generations became highly wider in the following waves of virtual consumption among Iranians that launched in the 2010s.

The other two waves of virtual consumption among Iranians took place in the 2010s. In this decade, the applications, social media including Facebook, Instagram, telegram (and their localized counterparts), are developing and the foundations of the Iranian modernity have been consolidated. For this reason, the religious and traditional families also show an interest and orientation to virtual consumption. Virtual consumption by Iranians that was originally urbanized, masculine and class-based, gradually came to be void of gender-based, class-based and geographic characteristics. The Internet-based businesses (E-businesses) have developed and virtual consumption of the goods and services is becoming a public orientation. This wave of virtual consumption has influenced deeper layers of the Iranian culture and identity. As a way of example, the

religious bodies and factions and even the religious authorities and jurists who typically have a traditional structure have become inclined towards virtual production and consumption. They are preaching and promoting religious values by launching websites and social platforms. This is consistent with our second hypothesis that in conservative and traditionalist structures, virtual consumption may not change such structures in the short run and on the contrary, it may be at the disposal of conservative and traditionalist values.

The socio-cultural and political activists have also set up their own virtual communities. They have practically made the cycle of virtual production, distribution and consumption a site for socio-cultural and political activism. In this wave of virtual consumption, all three paradigms of consumption are concurrently at work. The producers of virtual goods proceed to produce their own preferred ideological meanings; however, Iranian users are not consuming them passively, and rather their consumption is inclined towards a critical resistance. But that is not to say that passive consumers are few. Passive consumers are mostly lacking in digital and critical literacy and accordingly, they are unconsciously reproducing the very values championed by the discourse of power, i.e. the symbolic order in the society, thus they are becoming symbolically castrated. The active consumers, however, make their practice of consumption a site of ideological conflicts and thus they challenge the official discourse. The discourse of power that has an inclination towards the symbolic castration of the consuming subjects is making an attempt to turn the virtual communities of the dissident groups into a panopticon (in Foucauldian sense) through regulating apparatuses of the cyberspace including the High Council for Cyberspace and the Iranian cyber police and the judiciary system. By means of these regulatory systems, the discourse of power intervenes and controls the consumption regimes of the common users who lack in critical literacy.

Unlike the symbolically castrated subjects, there are Iranian virtual

consumers who circumvent the norms prescribed by the regulatory apparatuses of the discourse of power and resist being docile and disciplined bodies, as Foucault (1995:135) puts it. The very practice of their virtual consumption is subversive, because apart from producing counter-discursive contents and their grotesque self-representation within the cyberspace, they consume subversive contents (cultural commodities) and thus, push themselves away from the norms of the discourse of power. For example, many Iranian young women have an active digital presence. They are consuming this virtual space to subvert the traditional values promoted by the Iranian masculine culture and acting outside the rules and norms of masculinity as a discourse of power. In their profile pictures, many of them are unveiled (which is a major challenge to the official discourse). Unlike the symbolically castrated, traditional, passive and submissive women, they are active and critical of the discourse of power. Their critical comments against the discourse of power sometimes take up the form of sarcastic jokes and parodies to borrow from Judith Butler (1990). They take all of these discursive acts recursively to reverse the gender identity and the discursive limits of sex imposed on them by the phallogocentric discourse of power and this performativity gives them a voice to narrate their own preferred self-identity and exert their subjectivity. Accordingly, through their virtual consumption, not only the socio-political activists but also the normal users of the virtual space produce indeed a carnivalesque space, where all the norms and the discursive rules dominating in the real world are temporarily suspended and very sarcastic jokes about Iranian authorities, politics, the official discourses, and even the religious figures are raised, and where Iranian users feel the sense that they have stepped into a carnivalesque world where they can subvert all totalitarian and authoritative voices. This type of virtual consumption by Iranians is not only a way to spend their leisure time and amuse themselves, but also a prime example for the paradigm of consumption as an act of resistance as discussed

earlier in the theoretical section. One of the main push factors to consume such carnivalesque spaces is their absence in the real social world of Iranians. In fact, the contemporary Iranians compensate for this shortcoming through virtual consumption whereby they produce a virtual carnivalesque space for a symbolic clowning as an act of resistance against the central power.

The symbolic clowning is not restricted to the socio-political activists, but the ordinary Iranians also from all walks of life either produce or virally share jokes and caricatures about the politicians and other authorities on a daily basis via social media, especially via Telegram and Instagram platforms, which are the most popular among Iranians despite the fact that Telegram has been blocked by judicial authorities following the 2017–2018 Iranian nation-wide anti-governmental protests. In that time, the authorities of the judiciary system issued a decree that Telegram must be blocked by ISPs in such a way that it could not be accessed even with tools similar to VPNs. However, ever since, Iranian users have resorted to Internet censorship circumvention and proxies to bypass the judicial decree and have access to Telegram as a sign of resistance against the central power. In a survey by Iranian Students Polling Agency (ISPA) in 2018 just 6 months after the Telegram filtering, it was found out that despite the maximum pressure on the part of the government to force the people to use state-sponsored messengers instead of Telegram, the majority of the users are still using Telegram (*Euronews, 2018-10-16*). This virtual consumption by contemporary Iranians can be argued to be taking place as a symbolic reversal of power relations and as a way to manifest their suppressed subjectivity and agency.

One of the outcomes of the second and third waves of virtual consumption by Iranians as discussed by Fazeli (2018:497) is the visualization of the Iranian culture and identity and a downgrade in the oral culture among Iranians. As a consequence of virtual consumption and production, Iranians are visualizing and documenting their lived

experiences in the everyday life and sharing their images and video clips with the others within the cyberspace. Through emojis and virtual icons, they exchange their personal emotions and feelings; they seek to get more social media followers for their posts and comments, because the high number of the followers and likes/views will be interpreted as a degree of their visibility and readability. The desire for visibility and readability has not only made the emotions and feelings of Iranians more visual and more visible, but it has pushed away the Iranians from the culture of self-censorship towards the culture of self-expression. This can be interpreted as a reaction against the traditional culture of Iran that viewed self-censorship and invisibility of the family privacy as a value. It can also be viewed as a reaction against the discourse of power that deems the symbolic castration of the subjects within the cyberspace a desirable situation, a discourse that wouldn't like any image or voice to be seen, heard except for that of the official discourse. Moreover, contemporary Iranians' desire for visibility on the part of virtual consumers can be analyzed from a Bourdieuan Perspective as well. The high number of social media followers and likes would be interpreted as possessing a symbolic capital and power. This sense and perception of power, which has emerged as a consequence of the new waves of virtual consumption within the cyberspace, has challenged the traditional concept of power and has pushed Iranians from a dominated position towards a dominant position. Considering this epistemological turn and semantic leap in the concept of power, Iranian celebrities also make an attempt to make their personal lives and feelings more visible so as to increase the number of their followers and thus symbolically possess capital and power.

The visibility of Iranians thanks to the new waves of virtual consumption has globalized them, because within their virtual communities and personal blogs/ social media page, they express their feelings, views, lived experiences and memories and as a consequence, the various aspects of the Iranian culture and identity

including cuisine recipes, art, music, cinema, literature and so forth has become accessible to the people across the globe. Despite this epistemological expansion, the issue of class divide has once again drawn attention due to the fact that following the new waves of virtual consumption, some well-to-do and affluent Iranian families are displaying their extravagant lifestyle in their social media pages and thus making more visible the class divide and the unequal distribution of wealth in the Iranian society. This group of virtual consumers do not usually think rationally about their consumption behavior. Therefore, their virtual consumption is merely the outcome of a suggestion or manipulation by the capitalist system, and its outcome is nothing but the reproduction of capitalism (neo-capitalism). Although Iranian online stores are contributing to the commodification of the Iranian culture through advertising Iranian products, they are in practice contributing to the deepening of the class divide in the Iranian society by advertising luxurious and flashy commodities.

In the new wave of Iranian virtual consumption, we are experiencing the phenomenon of “social re-stratification”. According to this newly emergent phenomenon, the lower-class Iranians in their social media pages represent their lifestyle in a way that they seem to be belonging to the middle class. In fact, as Veblen (2008) views the practice of consumption as a sign of social status, they are producing a symbolic social status for themselves and approximating themselves to the higher classes of the society through virtual consumption. That is not to say that the members of the higher class also make an attempt to keep their class distance through adopting new consumption styles.

Finally, it suffices here to mention that the new wave of virtual consumption in Iran is influencing the aesthetic taste of Iranians as well. It includes a wide range of newly emergent creative arts by Iranian artists of which a mention can be made of digital literature (e-literature), digital cinema (e-cinema) and digital music which is yet to be explored.

Research Findings and Conclusion

The current study was an attempt to analyze the virtual consumption behavior of the contemporary Iranians within the framework of consumption studies. To this end, it reframed the global virtual consumption waves into the Iranian context to see to what extent there exists a correspondence between them in terms of form and content. It was found that the waves of virtual consumption in Iran do not follow the global linear pattern, rather the linearity of the global pattern has been replaced by circularity. This deviation in part originates from the fact that cultural consumption in Iran used to be highly elitist and urbanized, but it gradually lost its originally class-based, geography-based and gender-based disposition in favor of a popular disposition. This shift is the immediate outcome of a maximumist policy by the government of Iran with an inclination to maximize internet penetration rate across the country. This policy culminated in an unprecedented increase in the number of smart devices such as laptops and smartphones at the disposal of the Iranians that was followed by waves of virtual consumption by all the Iranians irrespective of their class, gender, education and geography.

The Iranian society found virtual consumption to be legitimate and rational, for it is compatible with the spirit of modernity. Accordingly, virtual consumption as a sub-set of cultural consumption was viewed to be one of the structural components of the Iranian-style modernity. With this orientation at hand, the virtual consumption by the Iranians was studied through the lenses of three paradigm shifts in consumption studies to see how it has influenced the main institutions of the Iranian society, i.e., culture, politics, family and social relations. It was found that the practice of virtual consumption (both passively and actively) has culminated in the reproduction of new identities and social relations, meanwhile having made the Iranian culture more flexible, visible, visual, accessible, global, feminine, democratic and modernized.

Another finding was that virtual consumption in democratic structures is assumed to promote democratic values including participatory culture, social liberties, civil rights, removal of social inequalities, ethnic/racial/religious and gender-based discriminations and so forth. However, in non-democratic, conservative and traditionalist structures, virtual consumption may not change such structures in the short run and on the contrary, it may be at the disposal of non-democratic, totalitarian, conservative, traditionalist values and structures. As for the Iranian context, both of these two extremes were observed. Despite having found a chance to express their self-subjectivity thanks to virtual consumption, the Iranians are still symbolically castrated by the non-democratic structures. Filtering policy by the government and the use of filtering circumvention tools by the Iranian people constitutes this dialectic of subjectivity and castration where the Iranians make their virtual consumption a practice of signification and resistance.

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