What can corporate India predict based on movies?

- *Dr. Kaustubh. Dhargalkar*

Why is it that some organizations consistently outsmart & outperform their competitors?

What is it that makes them come up with what consumers just seem to lap up?

Do they do something special …… consistently?

How can anything special be done consistently ? That's an oxymoron!

These organizations seem to have the pulse of the market at all times.

They always seem to be in a position to anticipate trends and create offerings (products as well as services) to service them. How is the big question?

A not very state-of-the-art field of study, Memetics seems to be catching the fancy of some organizations who wish to get into the mindscape of the consumer before any competitor gets to know about what's going on in there.

What is Memetics?

It is the study of memes, **so what is a 'meme'?** Richard Dawkins, in his book, "The Selfish Gene" (ch.11) has explained as follows:

 "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothing fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or reads about, a good idea, he passes it on to his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and his lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain. As my colleague N.K. Humphrey neatly summed up an earlier draft of this chapter: `... memes should be regarded as living structures, not just metaphorically but technically. When you plant a fertile meme in my mind you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the meme's propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell".

Simply put, Memetics is the study of 'cultural heredity', similar to how Genetics is the study of 'physical heredity'. How 'genes' are responsible for carrying forward our physical characteristics from generation to generation, similarly, 'memes' are responsible for transmitting our behavior to others. The noun, 'meme' has its origin in the verb, 'to mime', which means to imitate. Thus a 'meme' is a unit of behavioral imitation.

Why do some catchphrases stick in public memory while others just fade out? Why do some trends catch on and snowball into huge cult-followings, while others whither away as if they never existed?

Can Memetics help figure out these trends before they become real big?

How these trends become big and catch the fancy of the masses is best left to academicians and psychologists –**Enterprises need** to be in a position **to know** that these trends are catching up and act on this knowledge before anyone else does.

Where could these leads (that some trends are taking root in public imagination) come from? This, according to me, is the big question.

Every country/society has a **Popular culture** that is unique and it is the best indicator of what's happening or what's coming. A major part of popular culture in India is reflected by the following determinants:

1. **Films that we watch**. The success/ failure of a theme projected in a movie is a direct metric of the acceptance/ rejection of that concept by the general movie-going public.
2. **Cricket,** other sports too seem to be catching up of late.
3. **Television Soaps**
4. **Festivals**
5. **Politics**
6. **Food**
7. **Fashion**

If we follow these broad categories that define popular culture, we could be in a position to identify undercurrents in the behavior of people, which may snowball into trends at a later date. I would like to share a simple method that I have been following that seems to work.

Step 1: Take seven sheets of a large chart paper (commercially referred to as A0 size), the one that artists use for paintings etc.

Step 2: Title each sheet with a category from the seven determinants of popular culture listed above.

Step 3: Begin listing out a couple of major events in that category every week. By 'major events', I mean something that is different/unique and stands out from the mundane. You need not detail these, just a broad gist is enough.

Step 4: Continue this process religiously for a period of at least six months. If you could continue it longer, the better it would be.

Step 5: Every six months, keep these sheets side by side on the floor. Read all your posts from a standing position (this ensures that all the posts can be glimpsed simultaneously). When you do this, keep a watch for some connections across all the seven sheets. I am sure you can find some threads across the sheets that would appear as trends. Mark these connections and join the different threads with different colored lines.

I will share one such analysis that I have done in the past. It is a study conducted during the period 2005-08. Why an old study? Because the trends predicted then have been capitalized by the business world. In the following excerpt, I have only outlined the study without going into details, only a few relevant events have been mentioned (not the entire weekly log).

Event 1:

The movie**, 'Bunty Aur Babli'** released in May 2005, was one of the biggest hits of the year. The movie was about two small-towners wanting to make it big. The song "Chhote Chhote Shaharon se….." was quite a rage in addition to the chart-buster "Kajra re".

Depicted below is a gist (key observations) of a mind map around 'Bunty aur Babli:

- <mark>Devil-may-care attitude</mark> of the protagonists
- <mark>Small-towners</mark> with big dreams
- <mark>High aspirations</mark>
- <mark>Wanting to make a statement/become famous</mark>
- Guts
- Hit songs such as 'Kajra re' & 'Chhote Chhote shaharon se'
- <mark>Determined youth</mark>
- Youngsters who have run away from home

Event 2:

The movie, **'Iqbal'** released in August 2005, was about a village boy, who is speech and hearing challenged, but a highly talented bowler and makes it to the Indian cricket team after determined and sustained efforts.

Depicted below is a gist of a mind map around 'Iqbal'

- High on talent

- Determination and dedication

- Small town boy

- High aspirations

- Corruption in Indian cricket

- Strong support from the mother and sister for the boy

- Against all odds

- A mentor who believes in you

Event 3:

In Sept 2007, India won the T20 World Cup against all odds. The format was alien to the Indians at that time. The team was a bunch of rookies (all the established players like Tendulkar, Dravid, Ganguly, Laxman had opted to rest) captained by an audacious young man named Mahendra Singh Dhoni, with hardly any experience in captaincy. The only player from Mumbai was Rohit Sharma, who never played in the eleven through the tournament.

Depicted below is a gist of a mind map around 'The T20 World Cup winning Indian team'

- Youngsters

- Fearless (completely inexperienced, hence no exposure to defeat)

- Small-town players

- Wanting to prove themselves

- Enthusiastic

- No hang-ups

- Aggressive captaincy

- Risk-takers

- Marriage between the sports and the entertainment industries.

Event 4:

The movie, **'Jab We Met'**, released in October 2007 was a huge hit, especially so in the hinterland of India. It is the story of a starry-eyed, confident young girl from Bhatinda and a city-bred introverted boy.

Depicted below is a gist of a mind map around 'Jab We Met'

- A sardarni from Bhatinda
- <mark>Small-town</mark> girl
- <mark>Devil-may-care attitude</mark>
- <mark>Run way from home</mark>
- Positive approach to life
- Follow your heart
- A girl getting a boy home
- A prosperous agricultural family from small-town India
- Size zero
- Anger management

A simple visual analysis of these mind maps reveals a few common observations (marked in <mark>yellow</mark> above)-'*Youth from small-town India wanting to make it big, they will not be intimidated by their supposedly superior metro-bred brethren, they are willing to go many extra miles to make it big'.*

Each of the abovementioned events can be described as follows:

Bunti aur Babli- The movie was all about the spirit of the youth of small-town India (Tier-3 towns, as marketeers would like to put it) itching to establish their identity and make a statement "We are not going to be left behind in the India growth story". The fact that Bunty and Babli were shown to be crooks on the run can be overlooked as granting a poetic license to the filmmaker. The fact that the movie became a top-grosser is a metric of acceptance of the spirit (that small-town India is establishing its identity) by the movie-going public of India. This is the same class that many businesses want to target.

Iqbal- The movie was about the determination of a hearing & speech challenged talented young boy from a village, who is a gifted cricketer. It was the story about how 'against all odds'' the boy makes it to the Indian cricket team.

T20 World Cup- Circa September -2007, the **Indian Cricket team won the inaugural T-20 World Cup** in South Africa. A closer look at the composition of the Indian team reveals a strong

tilt towards players from ….. hold your breath. . Ranchi (Dhoni), Rae Bareli (R. P. Singh), Joginder Singh (Rohtak) Kochi (Sreesanth), Allahabad (Mohd. Kaif)…. More than 70% of the players were from non-metros, up there with the best in the world…. actually, on top of the world. These kids were no longer intimidated by their counterparts from Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai etc. that was a long way from the 80s and 90s where a Kapil Dev was an exception rather than the rule. That was small-town India on its way.

Jab We Met, released in October '07 was a huge hit. Karenna Kapoor, playing the role of a chirpy sardarni from Bhatinda finally proved that she could act too ☺. The family portrayed in the film was a prosperous agricultural family, albeit a conservative one. The film showed a **girl getting a boy to her house in Bhatinda,** something not quite seen even in urban India then. Kareena endeared herself to the movie-goers not just with her winsome charm but also her devil-may-care attitude –Mind you, it was all happening in Bhatinda, not in Mumbai or Delhi. The fact that the movie was a hit across the country (higher success in non-metro India) and overseas too is a metric of acceptance by the general Indian movie-going public. This meant that **the character of an independent girl with a mind of her own was accepted and empathized with by the supposedly "conservative" small-town Indian family.**

Insights
From the abovementioned events, can one not say that tier-2 and tier-3 towns were up their on the aspiration ladder along with urban India, back then?
Let us take a typical profile that emerges from all the abovementioned events:
"An 18-25 yr-old who has a mind of her/his own and would like to demonstrate it".
Mind you, this is not seen as a rebel. This is a character that has been accepted by and empathized with by the supposedly "conservative" small-town Indian family.

What does this profile mean for Corporate India?
In figures, let us focus only on the female population in this segment.
In India, in 2008 there were approximately 600 million youth in the age-group of 15-25 yrs.
Assuming 80% to be in the 18-25yrs bracket, it was a whopping 480 million chunk. Considering

that 48% (male-female ratio was 48:52, back then) of these were girls' turned out to be an astounding 230 million. Coupled with rising female literacy, this was a potent combination

What opportunities did this throw up for corporate India?

Newer markets for Apparels, Cosmetics, Music & Entertainment etc. Does it stop at that? No, it doesn't.

"What does an 'Independent' 18-25 yr. old girl aspire for?"

1. A successful career
2. Freedom of choice
3. Financial independence
4. The ability to fend for herself
5. Standing out among peers
6. Glamour
7. Staying connected

Based on the above parameters, let me list down some predictions made based on this study back in 2008 and see what actually happened between 2009 to 2012

Parameters	Predictions made in 2008 for non-metro India	What actually happened in non-metro India from 2009 to 2012
Successful career, financial independence & glamor	• An air-hostess training academy could attract a lot of enrolment in tier-2& 3 towns. • Training Institutions for Beauticians & Spa staff, Nutritionists, hospitality services • IT training institutions would spread their presence • A kind of "Finishing school" or a "Grooming Academy" would also attract a good crowd	• Frankfinn set up Air Hostess training centers pan-India in towns like Itanagar, Durgapur, Alwar, Palakkad, Thrissur etc • A host of IT training institutes set up centers across India. • Salons and spas mushroomed all over small-town India
Financial Independence & Being Noticed among Peers	Flaunting a **'Credit Card'** is considered 'cool' in this age-group. However, if a 18-19 yr old girl were to have a credit card, it would invariably be an "Add-on". She would be 'dependent' on her father or an elder sibling. After all an add-on is not 'the Real thing', is it? Should banks not look for some other metrics to judge the credit- worthiness of such youth	Penetration of Credit cards in rural India increased & the spending through credit cards increased by 29% from 2008 to 2013

Staying connected	Social Networking sites would need laptops for access. How many electronic Retailers have attempted to **sell laptops in the tier-3 town outlets**? Manufacturers of **mobile phones with GPRS platforms** need **to drop their prices** to become more accessible and widespread. These towns would lap it up. After all, it would cost a mere 25-30% of what a laptop would.	• Croma had 101 stores across 25 cities and towns in India by 2011. • Mobile penetration in India rose in geometric proportions in that period • GPRS- enabled phones outsold other types in non-metro India.
Fending for oneself	Girls hostels should increase in metros to tackle the influx of girl students into the cities	The central government launched a scheme in the fiscal 2009-10 to construct 100-bedded girls hostels across the country
Standing out among peers	Sports Clubs could find a large following considering the achievements of many from amongst them.	A lot of sports, not just Cricket, have generated a decent following across India. So many leagues have been launched for games which earlier no one cared to give a second look, e.g. hockey, football, kabaddi, badminton, boxing, wrestling etc.