

Marketing ethics – another business-oriented scheme?

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Abstract. *Marketing ethics is crucial for defining the link between businesses and consumers, impacting both economic transactions and society values. Ethical marketing underlines the utilization of ethical principles and standards to every element of the marketing process, including product development, advertising, and customer relations.*

This study looks at the intricate relationship between marketing ethics and how they could be used by companies to manipulate others. While following moral guidelines and standards has always been a requirement of marketing ethics, there is rising worry that companies are abusing this concept to influence consumer behaviour and views in order to benefit financially. This essay explores the delicate line that separates ethical manipulation from valid persuasion as it dives into the ethical issues that underpin marketing methods. It examines numerous strategies used by companies to violate marketing ethics, including misleading advertising, psychological pricing, and manipulation of social media algorithms, through an extensive analysis of case studies and literature. In addition, this study explores the cognitive biases and psychological mechanisms that marketers use to sway consumer decisions, providing insight into the moral ramifications of these tactics. Furthermore, it delves into the function of regulatory frameworks and corporate social responsibility endeavours in curbing unscrupulous marketing techniques and encouraging increased openness and responsibility in the sector. This paper aims to provide insights into the ethical challenges faced by businesses in navigating the modern marketing landscape and makes recommendations for fostering a more ethical and responsible approach to marketing practices by critically examining the duality of marketing ethics as both a guiding principle and a potential manipulation scheme.

Keywords: marketing, ethics, business-oriented purpose, manipulation.

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1. Introduction

Marketing ethics is crucial for defining the link between businesses and consumers, impacting both economic transactions and society values. Ethical marketing highlights the utilization of ethical principles and standards to every element of the marketing process, including product development, advertising, and customer relations.

The foundation of marketing ethics lies on the principles of honesty and openness. Open and clear communication cultivates trust between businesses and consumers. Product misrepresentations, misleading advertising, or undisclosed charges undermine this trust, perhaps resulting in lasting negative impacts on a company's reputation.

Protecting consumer privacy is of utmost importance in the era of digitalization. Responsible marketers uphold the privacy of consumer data, abiding by applicable rules and regulations. Acquiring informed consent and offering transparent information regarding data utilization are crucial for sustaining customer trust in a progressively data-centric marketing environment.

Ethical marketing implies engaging in fair competition, where organizations compete for success based on the quality and value of their offerings, rather than resorting to deceptive techniques. Unscrupulous competitive conduct, such as disseminating inaccurate information about competition, damages the integrity of the marketplace and creates a rather unfriendly, unmoral environment.

It is fundamental for businesses to give utmost importance to the safety of their products and exhibit a strong commitment towards sustainability. Ethical marketing promotes sustainable processes by assuring customer safety and minimizing environmental damage. This not only complies with ethical standards but also corresponds to the increasing customer demand for environmentally sustainable and socially accountable products.

An essential component of marketing ethics is social responsibility. There is a growing expectation for businesses to make a beneficial impact on society by tackling social concerns, fostering diversity, and participating in philanthropic activities. Ethical marketing goes beyond the pursuit of profits and includes a wider dedication to the overall welfare of society.

The rise of social media has led to an expansion of ethical considerations in marketing, integrating responsible activities on social media platforms. This implies the transparent management of sponsored material, ensuring user privacy, and preventing the promotion of false information, guaranteeing that marketing activities make a constructive contribution to online communities.

Businesses who give priority to ethical issues in their marketing strategy not only establish a favourable reputation for themselves but also have a crucial impact on establishing a marketplace that values honesty, openness, and regard for others. As customers grow more aware of ethical concerns, adopting marketing ethics is not just a moral obligation but also a strategic necessity for achieving long-term success and sustainability in the corporate environment.

2. Do businesses give priority to ethical issues?

Adopting marketing ethics as a tactic to present a moral image while masking unethical practices is a deceitful and ultimately unviable method. Although certain companies may try to capitalize on the favourable implications linked to ethical conduct for immediate benefits, this approach is prone to fail in the long term. Genuine ethical marketing surpasses just surface-level efforts to enhance reputation and requires a sincere dedication to ethical values across each aspect of business activities.

Modern consumers exhibit a growing level of awareness and knowledge. Uncovering a company's deceptive ethical image undermines trust when it is revealed to be a disguise for unethical behaviour. Re-establishing trust once it has been lost is a difficult and time-intensive operation. Exposure of unethical conduct can result in substantial harm to a company's reputation. In today's era of social media and instant communication, damaging information spreads quickly, posing challenges for organizations to manage the narrative and restore their damaged brand.

Employees typically have knowledge regarding the ethical conduct, or absence thereof, within their organization. Perceiving a discrepancy between the company's ethical reputation and its tangible actions might result in decreased morale, reduced job fulfilment, and increased staff loss. Over time, companies established on ethical principles have a higher probability of being durable. Efforts to conceal immoral behaviours might result in operational inefficiencies, heightened risks, and a lack of adaptability, therefore compromising the company's long-term sustainability.

Businesses adopt an extensive variety of persuasive strategies to influence individuals and motivate them to make decisions regarding their purchases. These approaches frequently originate from psychological principles and marketing strategies. Some of these tactics include creating a sense of limited availability that can prompt people to act quickly on their purchase decision.

Concentrating on testimonials, reviews, endorsements, or displaying the popularity of a product has an impact on potential customers. Individuals frequently seek direction from others, and the presence of encouraging social proof may build a sense of trustworthiness, leading them to ultimately make the purchase. The human tendency to observe, imitate, and adopt actions from those who are viewed as having a high social reputation is a deeply rooted phenomenon in our social structure. The act of imitating the behaviours, attitudes, and lives of individuals who portray themselves in a most often positive financial social manner is often known as the copycat phenomenon.

Social identity theory states that individuals classify themselves and others into social groups based on shared attributes. Observing individuals who are portrayed in a favourable manner within a specific social category induces a tendency to associate oneself with that group. The need to connect and align oneself with highly regarded individuals can influence the inclination to imitate their activities.

The social comparison hypothesis states that individuals instinctively judge themselves in comparison to others to evaluate their social status and self-worth. When people come

across persons who have positive social reputations, they might apply an act of social comparison, aiming to gain similar traits or accomplishments to improve their own perceived status. The media, advertising, and social platforms have a substantial influence on the formation of what is seen and perceived as being an acceptable societal perception. Celebrities, influencers, and persons who are portrayed in a favourable manner serve as role models, exerting influence over the decisions and actions of the wider population. The appeal of the beautiful lifestyles and accomplishments shown encourages a drive to imitate and reproduce similar patterns.

In the rapidly growing digital marketplace, intrusive online marketing strategies have become widespread, overloading users with persuasive messages that guarantee the path to happiness, success, and personal satisfaction by purchasing various products. As the magnitude of online marketing operations escalates, the likelihood of individuals resorting to drastic measures in their hunt for financial gain also rises. People who are influenced by these strategies, could feel compelled to resort to extreme actions, motivated by the conviction that purchasing the advertised products is crucial for their own wellbeing or social status. The widespread availability of aggressive online marketing develops a culture of rapid gratification when individuals strive for immediate fulfilment and approval by purchasing certain on-trend items. This impulsive behaviour may result in resorting to extreme methods, such as procuring loans with exorbitant interest rates or engaging in risky financial activities.

Aggressive marketing often presents owning certain things as an instrument to achieve success, happiness, and social approval. People, under the influence of these illusions, may turn to extreme actions, convinced that possessing the advertised products will drastically change their life and meet societal standards. The widespread aspect of online marketing cultivates a culture of endless social comparison. The concern of falling behind or failing to meet the standards set by other people may cause individuals to go to extreme methods to get products that are viewed as symbols of status or indicators of success and accomplishment.

Aggressive marketing often establishes a connection between owning a product and obtaining social approval and acceptability. Adolescents and not only may experience the influence of cultural expectations and peer standards, leading them to believe that owning specific items is crucial for being accepted and acknowledged in social circles.

Aggressive marketing often takes advantage on vulnerabilities and desires for personal growth. The continual exposure of young generations and current ones to messages that associate items with improved visual appeal, charm, beauty, success, or happiness can result in the development of false expectations, which in turn can have a negative effect on their self-esteem and body image.

Social media platforms and online marketing exacerbate the culture of comparison. Adolescents and any person exposed to online marketing may undergo anxiety and a sense of inadequacy when they compare their lifestyles and possessions to carefully planned, strategically marketed selected online representations and images of a certain social status and feelings of satisfaction resulted from such experiences. The continuous act of

comparing might lead to an enduring feeling of dissatisfaction, frustration, unhappiness, depression and sometimes anger.

The use of aggressive marketing techniques could influence the ambitions of the upcoming generations. Instead of prioritizing meaningful experiences, personal development, or societal contributions, standards may shift towards the acquisition of material items to attain perceived success and elevated social standing.

Consumers who lack sufficient knowledge and an understanding of the psychological tactics applied to aggressive online advertising are at risk for manipulation and influence. In the absence of adequate education on thoughtful consumption, individuals may turn to drastic actions without fully understanding the lingering consequence of their actions in their lives and how it's also going to impact the next generations (Bodislav, Georgescu, 2023).

The need to stay current with popular trends might lead individuals to build up debt through loans, credit cards, or using other high-interest financial tools (Bodislav, 2011). Debt can intensify financial strain and contribute to a cycle of hopelessness and unstable financial choices.

Social media has fundamentally transformed the way individuals connect, share, and communicate. However, it also has a paradoxical effect on how people perceive themselves and interact with others. The influence of social media is significant, shaping a person's self-esteem, self-perception, and identity. Social media platforms function as curated exhibitions where users display meticulously constructed representations of their everyday lives. Continuous exposure to idealized portrayals might affect self-perception as individuals compare their daily circumstances with the sophisticated, polished images offered online.

The widespread nature of online marketing and consumerism is heightened as individuals engage in a constant comparison of their belongings, activities, and lives with those displayed by their peers and influencers. Feelings of not being good enough can develop when personal accomplishments or financial assets do not meet the carefully constructed ideals promoted on social media. These platforms serve as virtual marketplaces where individuals showcase material possessions as indicators of their social status. The quest for contemporary trends and merchandise becomes deeply associated with the quest for social validation, users may associate the acquisition of consumer products with personal accomplishment, influencing both their sense of self-value and the evaluations they make about others.

The dominant online marketing and consumerism trend promotes continual comparison among people. Negative feelings, such as envy can arise in individuals when they observe the seemingly superior lifestyles of others, resulting in a persistent state of dissatisfaction and a never-ending pursuit for praise and validation from the public. Envy and the habit of comparing oneself to others on social media have been associated with heightened levels of depression, anxiety, and decreased general mental well-being (Georgescu, et al., 2021). The consumerism tendency worsens these consequences, contributing to a harmful digital environment. Quantifying social validation through likes and comments serves as a metric

for assessing a person's self-worth. It also perpetuates the notion that a content that is more aesthetically pleasing, glamorous and focused on consumption is more likely to receive social praise. Users may develop a sense of pressure to participate in expensive activities and events, also to acquire certain on-trend products to conform to the perceived societal standards, leading to impulsive purchasing decisions and lifestyle choices. Some people may prioritize the public display of material possessions rather than seeking genuine experiences, for the purpose of portraying a specific image about themselves online. The excessive focus on consumption things may prevent the growth of significant connections.

Online relationships are influenced by the consumerism trend as people strive to associate themselves with those who are believed to be enjoying the idealized lifestyle. The quest for external validation and acceptance may overpower genuine friendships.

3. Next gen' education in a flashy world

The extensive use of aggressive online marketing has the capacity to greatly impact future generations by fostering a culture of consumerism, in which the acquisition of items is directly related to one's status in society, by emphasizing material possessions as indicators of success and social standing. This could cause young persons to value consumer products over experiences, relationships, or personal growth. The widespread impact of consumerism, driven by aggressive marketing, also has the capacity to affect the perception and prioritization of education among younger generations. The prioritization of material items, immediate gratification, and the illusion of status in society by owning various advertised products can foster a societal environment in which education is overshadowed by the allure of certain consumer products (Lynch, 2005). Consumerism frequently pushes for the concept of instant satisfaction via acquiring products and certain services. Education, however, is a prolonged investment that may not produce immediate results. The emphasis on instant gratification derived from consumerism may cause younger generations to undervalue the long-term advantages of education.

If individuals believe that obtaining fashionable on trend things can lead to social prestige and recognition more quickly than investing in school and job advancement, their priorities may move away from appreciating educational accomplishments. The consumer culture frequently supports superficial signs of achievement, such as apparent wealth, brand loyalty and affiliation, and ownership of excessive luxuries. Prioritizing these indicators over educational achievements may result in the depreciation of education among younger generations. Social media, an influential tool for consumerism, has the potential to contribute to an inaccurate perspective of success. Adolescents are susceptible to influencers and peers who display material things, which might generate an urge for equivalent acquisitions. The excessive focus on consumer goods could dilute the significance of educational success. Education is frequently linked to fundamental principles such as self-improvement, knowledge gain, and the development of critical thinking abilities. If consumerism assumes a position of cultural dominance, the fundamental value of education may be overtaken by external benchmarks linked to material affluence (Becker, 2003). Individuals who place consumer items as a higher

priority than education are more likely to be prone to acquiring consumer debt. The burden of overwhelming debt could limit their capacity to pursue educational possibilities, thereby establishing a loop in which consumerism detrimentally affects access to education.

Consumer culture can also have an impact on individuals' job choices. If young individuals believe that profitable professions in consumer sectors provide faster routes to material success, there could be a shift away from pursuing educational pathways that match personal interests or societal needs. An excessive focus on consumerism can potentially contribute to a society that undervalues critical thinking skills, which are often developed through education (Georgescu, 2023). This may lead to a generation that possesses diminished abilities to critically assess information, make well-informed choices, and actively contribute to society in a significant manner.

The possible depreciation of education in the context of consumerism gives cause for concerns regarding the financial welfare and future economic prospects of the upcoming generation. Without prioritizing education, individuals may encounter difficulties in attaining the necessary skills and qualifications for long-lasting and satisfying professions.

In the absence of a significant focus on education, individuals might have a greater inclination towards pursuing employment that require minimal skills and typically offer lower compensation. This may result in increased competitiveness for entry-level opportunities in businesses that do not necessitate specialist expertise or qualifications.

The gig economy, distinguished by its transitory and flexible employment opportunities, has the potential to emerge as a significant revenue stream for future generations. Employment opportunities in the gig economy typically do not necessitate higher education, although they may lack the stability and perks commonly associated with conventional employment.

Certain individuals may choose to go into entrepreneurship or self-employment, aiming to establish firms in sectors that are in line with current consumer trends. Although formal schooling is not always necessary for entrepreneurship, it requires a distinct skill set that includes expertise in business, invention, and adaptability.

Individuals who are fortunate to inherit money or receive financial assistance from their family may heavily depend on their family's wealth as the main source of sustaining their consumerist lifestyles. Nevertheless, this approach is not feasible for all individuals and contributes to the perpetuation of economic inequality.

People may be inclined to pursue careers in fields closely associated with consumerism, such as retail, marketing, or sales. Employment in these industries may provide potential for immediate earnings but may be insufficient in long-term stability or possibility for professional progression. Economic instability could rise because of a reliance on low-skilled employment and consumer-driven revenue streams (Bran, et al, 2014). Insufficient education might make individuals more vulnerable to economic recessions and variations in the labour market. Lack of a strong education may prevent people from advancing in their careers. This could lead to a labour force characterized by a reduced number of highly trained individuals, which could impede the progress of the economy.

A society that fails to recognize the importance of education may encounter difficulties in promoting creativity, conducting research, and advancing technological development. Such a situation could potentially have far-reaching implications for economic competitiveness at a global level.

To address the possible depreciation of education due to consumerism, a joint effort is needed from educators, parents, and society. To guarantee that younger generations fully appreciate the lasting significance of education in creating their futures, it is crucial to highlight the fundamental value of education, foster critical thinking skills, promote, and educate a well-rounded perspective on materialism.

Successfully navigating a society that is fuelled by materialism and the desire to own on trend and extravagant commodities can be difficult, but it is feasible to reduce the likelihood and susceptibility to these societal demands.

4. Emotional bias and leading masses

It is essential to identify manipulative strategies in online advertising to make educated and conscious decisions as consumers and educate those around us. Such ads often play on emotions to influence behaviour by using sentimental imagery, heart-warming stories, or emotional music, sometimes they try to evoke strong emotions without providing substantial details about the product. Emotional manipulation could take away from the real benefits of the products. Some ads will use fear to create a sense of urgency and anxiety, suggesting that by not using their product, it could lead to negative effects. Corporations often hire celebrities and influencers to promote their products, linking the brand or the product to the celebrity's or influencer's perceived attributes or achievements. People need to understand and evaluate whether the celebrity's or influencer's association with the product is authentic or simply a promotional tactic. Authentic endorsements entail genuine personal experiences. Marketing generated materials may exhibit favourable reviews, testimonials, or user-generated content to influence impressions and opinions. They also need to exercise caution when the social proof lacks transparency or appears excessively positive without any critical perspectives. Genuine products will usually display a combination of reviews and viewpoints (Bodislav, et al., 2016). Online advertisements sometimes use pseudo-scientific terminology or provide false claims to enhance the perceived efficacy of their product, so individuals should seek scientific proof. If the statements appear to be overdone or lacking evidence, it is probable that it is an attempt to manipulate.

Advertisements may make claims about a specific product or service, yet ultimately provide something that is dissimilar or of inferior quality, if an ad promises a specific outcome or product but includes fine print that contradicts the main message it is probable that it applies a bait-and-switch strategy (Branson et al., 2010). Certain advertisements induce a feeling of exclusion or inferiority complex if the consumer fails to purchase the products in question.

There also must be some caution applied to some advertisements that prioritize social influence while neglecting to emphasize the actual benefits of the product (Bodislav, et al., 2023). Authentic advertisements prioritize product attributes rather than social influence.

5. Conclusion

Consumers may boost their ability to recognize deceptive tactics and make more informed decisions by remaining aware and partaking in critical evaluation of advertising messages. Acquiring proficiency in media literacy and recognizing frequent manipulation tactics can help individuals to deal with the advertising environment with greater power.

People can get overwhelmed by the abundance of information available online. The inclination for rapid and effortless assimilation may result in an inclination to accept information without meticulous verification. Individuals have an inherent tendency to prefer information that is consistent with their pre-existing views and values. Confirmation bias can cause someone to uncritically accept information that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs, without thoroughly assessing its accuracy.

Information that is consistent with pre-existing beliefs or given in a familiar manner needs less cognitive exertion, increasing the likelihood of being accepted without additional review.

Social media and online groups foster echo chambers, wherein individuals are encircled by those who have similar perspectives. Peers and social circles can exert a significant impact, resulting in the uncritical acceptance of information as a group. Online platforms employ algorithms to tailor information according to users' tastes and habits, this phenomenon can give rise to a filter bubble, wherein individuals are only exposed to material that conforms to their pre-existing beliefs, hence strengthening their perception of its credibility while lacking different perspectives.

A significant number of individuals may lack effective media literacy skills, such as the capacity to critically evaluate the credibility of digital information. Insufficient awareness about misinformation and disinformation can lead to a rapid acceptance of inaccurate or misleading information. To combat the inclination to accept all digital information as being true, it is necessary to implement a comprehensive approach that includes educating individuals in media literacy, encouraging the development of critical thinking abilities, and advocating a culture of verifying and fact-checking.

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