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COMMENTARY

Marketing and consumerism

A response to O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy

Marketing and
consumerism

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy's response to accusations about marketing's detrimental impact on society.

Design/methodology/approach – A review of the empirical research on consumerism and materialism to date.

Findings – Indicates that consumerism is associated with reduced personal wellbeing and that the rise of consumerism parallels the rise of modern marketing to a remarkable extent, although in both cases the causal direction is unclear.

Research limitations/implications – The paper proposes further research to help understand to what extent it is possible to work within the current market economy structures to reduce the incidence and harms of consumerism.

Originality/value – The main contribution of this paper is that it shows that the association between marketing practice and the harms of consumerism may be greater than it is generally believed to be by marketing academics.

Keywords Consumerism, Consumers, Consumer protection

Paper type Conceptual paper

The accusation that contemporary marketing practice contributes to creating a consumerist or materialist society is a serious one. If it has merit then the marketing concept, which is at least in part about delivery of satisfaction to consumers, is also fostering activity that is detrimental to this satisfaction. O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) offer a wide-ranging defence of marketing, identifying and responding to several accusations about marketing and its impact on consumer society. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this debate by providing a critical examination of three important claims made in O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002): that the harms of materialism have not been demonstrated empirically; that it is unlikely that marketing causes materialism; and that no alternatives to the current system that are consistent with human freedom appear to exist. The present paper reviews existing empirical and historical evidence to show that each of these claims is only partially correct and that the defence of marketing offered in O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) is therefore insufficient, and proposes additional research for advancing our understanding of the relationship between marketing and consumerism.

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The harms of consumerism[1]

The first claim examined by this paper is that the “alleged characteristics” of consumer society “constitute descriptive hypotheses, which . . . can be shown to be true or false. . . No such research has been carried out” (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 529). The particular characteristic of consumer society that is of interest here is the existence of the condition of consumerism or materialism. This condition has been studied extensively by psychology and consumer behaviour scholars. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) and Kasser (2002), in their respective summaries of this body of work, acknowledge a general conclusion that consumerism is associated with reduced consumer well-being, particularly in terms of the quality of human relationships and levels of happiness.

In contrast to the conventional wisdom that “more is better”, Csikszentmihalyi notes that there is substantial empirical evidence to support the idea that “beyond a rather low threshold, material well-being does not correlate with subjective well-being” (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 270; citing Csikszentmihalyi, 1999; Diener, 2000; and Myers, 2000). This finding has been replicated cross-culturally: studies of European, Asian, Australian and American consumers reveal a negative relationship between materialism and life satisfaction (Ahuvia and Wong, 1995; Chan and Joseph, 2000; Dawson and Bamossy, 1991; Diener and Oishi, 2000; Kasser and Ahuvia, 2002; Keng *et al.*, 2000; Richins and Dawson, 1992; Ryan *et al.*, 1999; Ryan and Dziurawiec, 2001; Saunders and Munro, 2000; Schmuck, 2001; Sirgy *et al.*, 1995; Swinyard *et al.*, 2001; Wright and Larsen, 1993).

Kasser (2002) summarizes his own extensive research in this area as well as findings from other psychology researchers (Kasser and Ryan, 1993, 1996, 2001; Sheldon and Kasser, 1995, 1998, 2001; Carver and Baird, 1998; Srivastava *et al.*, 2001; McHoskey, 1999; Roberts and Robins, 2000; Cohen and Cohen, 1996), as well as the consumer researchers cited above. The main conclusion of his book is that there are “clear and consistent findings” that people “who are highly focused on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who believe that materialistic pursuits are relatively unimportant” (Kasser, 2002, p. 22; see also Kasser and Kanner, 2003).

This empirical study of materialism is not without its problems. Mick (1996) found that research on materialism and other “dark side” variables can be influenced by socially desirable responding (SDR): the tendency for people to present themselves favourably according to current cultural norms. Perceived negative impressions of materialism can lead to significant underreporting of materialistic values and behaviours: in the face of apparent disapproval, respondents may be reluctant to admit that they are materialistic. However, Kasser (2002, p. 120, fn. 11) tested for and did not find effects of SDR in his own work; furthermore, if SDR is present, then the situation is, if anything, worse than the research indicates. Another concern raised is with the Material Values Scale (Richins and Dawson, 1992) and other scales used in materialism research when these are applied to cross-cultural research. These scales have been developed mostly by researchers in the USA, and they tend to be mixed-worded scales (i.e. they use both positive and reverse-worded scales). Researchers have since found that mixed-worded scales can cause problems with both measurement equivalence and construct validity when used cross-culturally (Wong *et al.*, 2003). Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) note that the correlations between materialism and (negative)

wellbeing in most studies have been quite modest, suggesting that the relationship is influenced by other factors. Finally, all the studies cited focus on association between consumerism and reduced wellbeing, and none of them have demonstrated a causal connection.

Researchers have nevertheless theorized as to why there may be a causal relationship from materialism to reduced well-being, by suggesting that materialism involves a reversal of priorities wherein consumers give up values and behaviours that tend to be associated with greater satisfaction in favour of those that are associated with lesser satisfaction. Specifically, Ahuvia and Wong (2002), building on Inglehart (1977), argue that materialism prioritizes lower order needs over higher order needs, which results in lower levels of life satisfaction. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (2002) propose that the individualistic orientation of materialist values conflicts with collective-oriented values such as family or religion. This conflict creates tension, which is then associated with a reduced sense of wellbeing.

For Borgmann (2000, p. 420), the core problem with consumerism is that it “attenuates human engagement with material reality” – it gets in the way of living a fuller human life. Modern manufacturing, packaging, and distribution technologies facilitate the separation of (more easily available) benefits from the (more sophisticated and concealed) devices that produce the benefits, allowing us to consume while being (apparently) completely removed from the context and consequences of our consumption on ourselves, others, and the environment. This leads to a loss of satisfaction as our mental and physical faculties atrophy (Borgmann, 2000). As Scitovsky (1976) has pointed out, enjoyment and challenge are often related, perhaps even necessarily so.

Strictly speaking, therefore, O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy (2002) are correct in claiming that the harms of materialism have not been proven. But it is equally correct to say that materialism has not been proven harmless, either. As the forgoing shows, there is a reasonable theoretical basis for believing that materialism causes reduced wellbeing, as well as extensive empirical evidence associating materialism and reduced wellbeing. On balance, therefore, it would seem that materialism is more likely to be harmful than harmless, although additional research is needed to resolve this issue.

The relationship between marketing and consumerism

The second claim examined by this paper is that marketing cannot really be the cause of materialism because “materialism became part of the human condition long before the first advertising executive” (O’Shaughnessy and O’Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 545). This claim is hard to defend because the historical evidence indicates that the growth of consumer culture is paralleled to a remarkable extent by increases in the sophistication and intensity of marketing efforts across a span of over 300 years.

Stearns’ (2001) review of the historical research on consumerism indicates that this phenomenon has made sporadic appearances over the past two millennia: the later Roman Republic, the Arab Warriors of the tenth century, and the European nobility of the thirteenth century all exhibited what could be interpreted as consumerist phenomena (Stearns, 2001). However it is not until the mid-eighteenth century that consumerism takes on the full-blown dimensions that we associate it with today. One initial sign of the rise of modern consumerism, according to Stearns, was the growing market for sugar, “a food that is by no means necessary” (Stearns, 2001, p. 15).

The rise of consumerism and the increase in the quantity and sophistication of marketing efforts appear to have tracked each other for the last three centuries. Stearns chronicles what can be seen as the side-by-side emergence of consumer culture and development of marketing channels and methods across the eighteenth century in Western Europe. He notes that fashion magazines, already in existence in France by the 1670s, were joined by loss leader retailing techniques as early as 1747. Around the same time retailers began using consumer credit and publicity events to attract customers, while text-based advertisements were in frequent use by the 1780s (Stearns, 2001).

Due to lower urbanization and greater persistence of religious values, consumerism developed somewhat later in the USA. However, by the 1850s it appears to have caught up with Europe, and with the development of more complex retail channels such as department stores and catalogue distributors, and more sophisticated advertising using visuals, colour, and appeals to emotions, consumerism in the USA outpaced that in Europe by the 1880s in some areas. By 1900, many companies had research departments focused on introducing modifications to products, while the practice of annual model changes in cars, often largely cosmetic, began in the 1920s (Stearns, 2001, pp. 37-47). From then on, the intensity of marketing continued to accelerate.

The lack of longitudinal data on actual levels of consumerism among consumers across this time period precludes any definitive correlation of growing marketing sophistication with rising consumerism, but the impression of such correlation is certainly there. The time period covered, particularly from the mid-1800s to the present, does coincide with what is generally agreed to be the widespread growth of consumerism. As a proxy for the growth of consumerism, one can look to the periodic (and persistent) criticism of the phenomenon. Marx (1844/1975) and Veblen (1899/1994) are early examples. By 1933, Dorothy Sayers, in her detective story *Murder Must Advertise*, is criticizing the effect of advertising on:

... the comparatively poor, ... those who, aching for a luxury beyond their reach and for a leisure ever denied them, could be bullied or wheedled into spending their few hardly won shillings on whatever might give them, if only for a moment, a leisured and luxurious illusion (Sayers, 1933, p. 153).

This is followed in turn by Galbraith (1969), Baudrillard (1981), Bourdieu (1984), Schwartz (1994), and Schor (1998), among others. The increased frequency of these critiques suggests that interest in the condition, if not the strength of the condition itself, continued to increase across this time period.

This apparent co-development of marketing and consumerism is worth noting, although it does not demonstrate causality. It is possible – as O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) and others (e.g. Thurow, 1981; Twitchell, 2000) have maintained – that the tendency to materialism is part of the human condition, and that as widespread material prosperity arose, it permitted the emergence of both marketing activity and consumerist behaviour simultaneously.

The broader question here is "What role does marketing play in the growth of materialism?" Consumer researchers have suggested a causal relationship between advertising and materialism (Zinkhan, 1994; Zinkhan and Prenshaw, 1994; Pollay, 1986; Belk and Pollay, 1985) and several empirical studies have associated watching television and television advertising with higher levels of materialism, particularly among children (Kinsey, 1987). However, causality has not been demonstrated, and the causal direction may well be in the opposite direction, because higher levels of

materialism might induce more TV watching, rather than the reverse (Roedder, 1999, citing Churchill and Moschis, 1979; Moschis and Moore, 1982; Ahuvia and Wong, 2002, citing O'Guinn and Shrum, 1997; Sirgy *et al.*, 1998).

The claim that marketing does not cause consumerism because consumerism antedates marketing is thus inadequate. While it is quite possible that a tendency towards materialistic behaviour exists within human beings – because whenever we are given the opportunity we tend to exhibit this behaviour – we cannot ignore the extensive and striking parallels between the growth of consumerism and the growth of modern marketing. As marketing scholars we should continue to be concerned about the likely contribution of our discipline to materialism.

The existence of credible alternatives

The third claim addressed by this paper is that it is “not clear what the alternative to the consumer society is when people become relatively affluent and seek freedom of choice” (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 544). The implication is that, even if it could be shown that consumerism is harmful and marketing contributes to consumerism, we do nevertheless seem to live in something close to the “best of all possible worlds” where the harms of consumerism are more than offset by the benefits of the overall marketing system (see Wilkie and Moore, 2003). Consumers make free choices and this is the arrangement that they themselves have chosen; thus any change to the status quo “must come from the people themselves, as coercion only achieves minimal compliance and is incompatible with the value of liberty and freedom of choice” (O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy, 2002, p. 544).

This rejection of coercive approaches is understandable. Many of the critics of consumerism (e.g. Marx, 1844/1975; Baudrillard, 1981; Bourdieu, 1984; Featherstone, 1991; Miles, 1998) do not appear to be admirers of the market economy and the alternative that they offer is (at least implicitly) a non-market economy. Fitchett (2001), in his review of Miles (1998), argues that:

... [f]or the ideological basis of the [critique of consumer culture] to be generally accepted, it is necessary to identify with at least the same level of clarity and description alternative “ways of life” and their ideological consequences.

Since one of the “ideological consequences” of a command economy is a sharp curtailment of human freedom, it is easy to see why most marketing scholars reject this alternative. Even the proposals of critics of consumerism who are closer to the mainstream appear to favour stronger regulatory approaches, suggesting, for example, steeply graduated income taxes with high marginal rates as a disincentive for consumption (Frank, 1999), or the elimination of the tax-deductibility of advertising for firms (Schor, 1998).

If we suspect that marketing is contributing to the harmful effects of consumerism, is there anything that can be done short of rejecting the entire market economy? Csikszentmihalyi (2000) suggests that greater transparency about the effects of materialism could help. If consumers appear to have chosen the status quo, it is perhaps because they are unaware of the empirical findings cited above. If consumers appear to choose excessive material consumption, perhaps they are unaware that such behaviours do not lead to greater levels of satisfaction. Increased efforts at consumer education may be able to correct this and lead to changes in consumer behaviour.

Given the dramatic changes in consumers' smoking behaviour over the past few decades that appear to have been driven by the extensive efforts to publicize scientific findings about the harmful effects of smoking, marketing scholars should at least consider whether we could achieve similar results with regards to consumerism.

Further research

In order to continue to develop our understanding of marketing and its relationship with consumerism, a number of areas of research are suggested here. First, the concept of consumerism/materialism needs further definition and clarification. Although originally conceptualized as trait-based by Belk (1983, 1985), it has also been conceptualized as values-based (Richins, 1994a, b; Richins and Dawson, 1992; Ahuvia and Wong, 2002). Holt (1995) has raised the important question of whether materialism is more about how rather than what one consumes, which does not appear to have been addressed by empirical research in this area.

Second, we need to find ways to explore questions of causality. This is complicated by the apparent omnipresence of consumerism in Western society, which makes it difficult to find control groups. One possibility is to study the voluntary simplicity/downshifting movement. With a few notable exceptions, (e.g. Craig-Lees and Hill, 2002; Shama, 1985), there has been remarkably little attention paid by marketing scholars to this type of non-consumerist consumer. Studying this segment and comparing it with other consumer segments could provide further insights and understanding into the nature and causes of consumerism. A second possibility is to pursue longitudinal studies of regions where consumerist behaviour is only just beginning to appear, such as parts of India and China.

Finally, studies of the relationship between marketing and consumerism almost always look to the effects of mass marketing – the kinds of marketing done by larger firms. There has been little study of the differences in impact on materialism between marketing by large versus by small firms. Anecdotal evidence indicates that the effects of marketing by small firms may be less likely to lead to materialism – the preferences of non-consumerist consumers for smaller, local enterprises, for example, suggest this. Small businesses have unique marketing concerns (Day, 2000), and these are beginning to receive attention from marketing scholars (e.g. Boter, 2003; Chaston, 1997; Chaston and Mangles, 2003; Chaudhry and Crick, 2003; Chetty and Campbell-Hunt, 2003; Ghauri *et al.*, 2003; Graham, 1999; Hultman and Shaw, 2003; Katsikea and Morgan, 2003; Stan *et al.*, 2003; Williams, 2003), as are the marketing concerns of craft industries (Fillis, 2002; Torres, 2002; Tregear, 2003) and community-supported agriculture (Hibbert *et al.*, 2003). Research exploring the implications of marketing by these forms of organization on materialism should help us better understand what types of marketing are more likely to cause consumerism, and whether advances in technologies that enable small businesses individually or collectively to overcome some of the diseconomies of small scale (e.g. Cooke, 1996; Dandridge and Levenburg, 2000; Poon, 2000) could provide an opportunity to reduce the incidence of materialism without decreasing the contribution of modern marketing to prosperity.

Conclusion

O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy (2002) provide an important, wide-ranging rebuttal to accusations about the impact of marketing on society. Their paper

contained three important but incomplete claims. The present paper examined these three claims and found associations between consumerism and reduced personal wellbeing and between the historical development of consumerism and rise of modern marketing, although in both cases the existence of a causal relationship and its likely direction remain unclear. It also proposed further research to help our understanding of whether it is possible to work within the current market economy to reduce the incidence of materialism.

Note

1. Consumerism is defined in this paper to mean excessive attachment to material possessions. The word "excessive" in this definition is important, because it indicates attachment to possessions that goes beyond those possessions' ability to provide satisfaction commensurate with the investments (both economic and psychological) made in them. This definition is equivalent to materialism, which is also defined as excessive attachment to possessions (Belk, 1985; Inglehart, 1977; Ahuvia and Wong, 2002), and thus for the purposes of this paper the terms consumerism and materialism are used interchangeably.

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