



COMMENTARY

Reply to criticisms of marketing, the consumer society and hedonism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to reply to Andrew V. Abela's "Marketing and consumption: a response to O'Shaughnessy and O'Shaughnessy": *European Journal of Marketing*. The article challenges a number of alleged claims in their paper "Marketing, the consumer society and hedonism", and the authors' response seeks to present a systematic and, hopefully, intellectually coherent answer to Abela's critique.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper proceeds via discussion, argument and conceptual analysis. The three key areas of critique, which focus on the notion that these authors are somehow desensitized to the ethical significance of materialism and marketing's role in its causation, are examined in succession.

Findings – There can be no finality in this discussion, only further debate; nevertheless we believe we substantiate our claim that marketing alone does not "cause" materialism but that it is an inalienable fact of human nature. The first claim attributed to us was that the harms of materialism had not been demonstrated empirically. This misrepresents what we said and nowhere in the paper did we make such a claim. The second alleged claim is that we said it is unlikely that marketing causes materialism. Much here depends on how Abela is interpreting cause, since we do not deny marketing contributes by facilitating materialism but reject the idea that it is a necessary or sufficient condition for materialism. The third claim is that we see no alternatives to the current system that are consistent with human freedom. This paper acknowledges this charge, but questions whether strong consumer materialism is a major problem and maintains in any case that the alternative suggested by Abela is neither feasible nor viable.

Research implications/limitations – This stands as part of the larger fields of marketing ethics, macromarketing and, more broadly, the "politics of consumption" (which would include such areas as globalisation); the merit/demerit of marketing as a transformative social force, and whether it is materialising peoples and cultures, is high on any future marketing research agenda. This article contributes to that debate.

Practical implications – If the ills of society are successfully attributed to the agency of marketing – and "materialism" is a convenient shorthand for these ills – then we invite legislative and other forms of retribution. It is important therefore that alternative perspectives get a hearing.

Originality/value – This topic is ultimately about the ethical status – and by extension social value – of marketing itself. By rigorous conceptual analysis and theoretic and literary support, these authors create a credible, though by no means uncritical, alibi for marketing.

Keywords Marketing, Consumerism, Ethics

Paper type Conceptual paper



Abela (2006) makes what he describes as:

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.

While he does not say we condone materialism, he sees us as too glibly endorsing its inevitability in human affairs and too readily resigning ourselves to that fact. As we will argue, this is not in fact our position and what we thought was a nuanced and subtle case has been misinterpreted.

If an absolute connection is made between marketing and materialism, the reputé of marketing falls under question both as a social practice, and even as an academic discipline. For if it is equated exclusively or even mainly with materialist self-seeking, it becomes an obnoxious social performance and, insofar as the discipline endorses the practice, a pariah academic discipline (in some circles at least). So this debate between ourselves and Abela is neither trivial nor irrelevant. The question is a fundamental one, and its ramifications also go far beyond marketing academe. It cuts to the heart of current social and political arguments – debates that ultimately are about the status of marketing itself, ethical, social and otherwise: a (relatively) new discipline is nervous of its position in an academy perplexed or even disapproving about what it actually is. For this reason there is value in such a debate.

We will discuss each of these three accusations in turn.

Claim 1

The accusation is that marketing, the consumer society and hedonism claims that the harms of materialism have not been demonstrated empirically. We were not however referring to some hypothesis regarding the harms or otherwise of materialism, but simply making reference to the various descriptive labels that are applied to today's consumer society. The exact quote is:

The alleged characteristics of this consumer society approximate those associated with postmodernity (Lyon, 1994; Brown, 1995; Rosenau, 1992; Best and Kellner, 1997). These alleged characteristics constitute descriptive hypotheses that (unlike scientific hypotheses which can never be proved absolutely) can be shown to be true or false, providing there is agreement on operational definitions and a sampling plan. No such research has been carried out. The claims made by critics are taken to be self-evident from observation. However they are by no means self-evident and, in any case, cannot be taken necessarily as an indictment of modern society.

These were the claims, or seven alleged characteristics, of the consumer society that we discussed:

- (1) The accumulation and display of material possessions.
- (2) Satisfying transitory appetites and created wants.
- (3) Seeking positional goods for social status and social bonding.
- (4) Consumers take their identity from their possessions.
- (5) Consumption cleavages being less based on actual class.
- (6) The impact of fantasy and imagery in influencing buying.
- (7) Privileging ephemeral and superficial values.

These were put forward as descriptive hypotheses on how postmodernity is portrayed. Just as a descriptive hypothesis such as: 'this country is in a state of depression' can be established as true or false providing we agree on the definition of depression and its operational measure, descriptive characteristics of society could in theory be tested providing we agree on operational measures. We argued such empirical research had not been carried out. Nor could it be until such measures had been universally agreed: but "materialism" is a rhetorically loaded word, an example in Klemperer's (2000) terms of "language which thinks for you" and biases us in various ways, such that its operational definition becomes impossible to seek objectively. Marxists for example often claim to be materialists. But there is really no materialist philosophy or ideology as such. The meaning of the term has open texture – covering anything from a fondness for collecting porcelain china dolls to the rabid accumulation characteristic of, say, Russian oligarchs or successful footballers. Given this, operational meaning will continue to be elusive because the concept itself lacks a definition in which to operate, one with the tightness and rigor necessary for scientific verification.

Abela ignores these topics and our systematic analysis of them, focusing exclusively on what he calls the "existence of the condition of consumerism or materialism". The two concepts are not synonymous. Generally we define consumerism as both giving priority to the culture of consumption and promoting it, and materialism (outside philosophy) as a preoccupation with the pursuit of material goods at the expense of other more interesting things – human relationships, love, etc. We referred to consumerism and materialism only in passing and never in connection with the seven theses on the nature of consumer society. Abela is surely confusing a description of the state of society with the assumed consequences if the description were true. Even if we could deduce, from one or more of the seven hypotheses promulgated above, that materialism was inevitably one of the alleged characteristic of society, Abela, to challenge us, would need to go beyond this and marshal the evidence to show materialism was not merely present but ascendant, that it was in fact the dominant feature of such a culture.

Yet we are accused by Abela of denying there is evidence for the dysfunctional consequences of materialism. But nowhere do we do this. In fact, if materialism were the absolute value for a consumer, it would simply be a conceptual truth that other values, like altruism, would, as a consequence, get displaced. Given this is so, we would not dispute Kasser's (2002) findings, quoted by Abela, that those who possess strong materialistic values had a greater risk of unhappiness, depression, low self-esteem and problems of intimacy, regardless of culture. And while many would persuasively claim that western societies are hedonistic, hedonism is conceptually very distinct from the idea of materialism though the two terms are often confused. Kasser, a psychologist at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, has been unrelenting in attacking the "culture of consumption" whereby people come to believe that the "good life" results from possessions and the status and visibility that goes with them. He presents correlations showing that those with strong materialistic values have significantly lower empathy, more competitiveness, more Machiavellian tendencies, less generosity and engage in fewer pro-social behaviors, all dysfunctional to societal cohesion. What we would however debate is whether "strong", i.e. preoccupied or even obsessive, materialistic values are characteristic of modern western societies.

Kasser claims there are four sets of needs that are essential for personal well-being:

- (1) physical security;
- (2) feelings of competence and self-worth;

- (3) relationships with other people; and
- (4) autonomy and self-expression.

Even if none of Kasser's needs were satisfied, there is no sequence of logical causation that would lead inevitably, or even frequently, to a materialist preoccupation. Nor does materialism, or even chronic materialism, displace or even degrade alternative values. Americans, usually castigated as the world's most materialistic people, are also its most philanthropic and, in the western world at least, most inclined to churchgoing (40 per cent of the population). According to Kasser strong materialistic values occur in some people who have a history of not having these needs met. But that is not an impressive finding, or really a "finding" in any sense. Kasser's list is a variation of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs, itself a reaction in therapy to the narrow conception of man, reflected in the two dominant approaches at the time to therapy, namely, behavior modification (behaviorism) and Freudian psychoanalysis:

- (1) *Basic needs*:
 - physiological; and
 - safety needs (Kasser's physical security need).
- (2) *Social needs*:
 - belongingness/need for affection (Kasser's relationship with others);
 - esteem needs (Kasser's feelings of competence and self-worth); and
 - self-actualization (Kasser's self-expression).

There is in fact no generally agreed set of needs in the sense of absolute requirements, beyond physiological and safety needs. As contrast, we have David McClelland's (1961) need categories:

- need for affiliation;
- need for power; and
- need for achievement.

McClelland assumes that just one of these needs will be dominant in any individual. Even if we were to accept Kasser's or Maslow's list as true needs, intentional action is also guided by beliefs (not just needs) and beliefs can change.

The question arises as to the incidence in society of those with materialistic values. How many adult consumers are preoccupied with materialistic values to the extent that the values of social relations or the nurturing of their children are ignored or neglected? Kasser says strong materialistic values are both a symptom of underlying insecurity and a coping strategy adopted to satisfy needs; teenagers who reported having the higher materialistic values were prone to be poorer and to have less nurturing mothers. Would not this sense of deprivation in itself induce a fantasy of the joys of materialism? Generally, human values are multiple and conflicting with constant tradeoffs, e.g. between integrity and the value of personal enhancement. Burroughs and Rindfleisch (1977) found in fact that the unhappy were those undergoing the most conflict between pro-social values and materialistic values. DeAngelis (2004) commenting on this and other studies, concludes that the evidence suggests that the differences in life satisfaction between the more materialistic and the less materialistic

(rather than between those with non-materialistic values versus those the strong materialistic values) are relatively small.

Materialism is an aspirational condition: it follows that those who have achieved sufficiency/ satiety either by work or by inheritance are less likely to be materialistic whatever else they might be. But man is a social animal and even his materialism is subordinate to this – we become material in pursuit of goals that are social, to be loved, valued, recognized, noticed. Conspicuous consumption, when it occurs at all, is often dramaturgic in intent and a species in fact of street theatre.

Abela draws on Csikszentmihalyi (2000) with approval. We agree, and in our paper point out that Csikszentmihalyi (2000) shows that beyond a low threshold, material well-being does not correlate with subjective well-being. Csikszentmihalyi argues that research indicates that excessive concern with financial success and material values is associated with less satisfaction with life. In fact excessive concern for material goals is a sign of dissatisfaction with life: people report being happier in life when they are actively involved with a challenging task and less happy when they are passively consuming goods or entertainment. But Csikszentmihalyi (2000) also argues that humans have a need to keep consciousness in an ordered state by seeking fresh experiences: shopping is just one part of this quest to fill the void in our consciousness. We may imagine rich people are unhappy people on the assumption that one must be a materialist in order to be rich, but there is no evidence for the greater melancholy of the rich; if anything, the reverse.

Claim 2

The accusation is that marketing, the consumer society, and hedonism claims that it is unlikely that marketing causes materialism. But we never discuss marketing as a cause of materialism. What we do say is that marketing has been more facilitator than manufacturer of consumerism, that is, a contributory factor in its rise and no more. To deny this would be a denial of the power of marketing to persuade. As a contributory factor is causal, this belies the claim made in the accusation. We would argue in fact that marketing and materialism in society form an interdependent system in that marketing helps precipitate materialism but materialism advances the development of marketing. The idea that marketing causes, in the sense of being a necessary or sufficient condition for materialism, is a fiction that long ago entered the bloodstream of the commentariat and the bien pensant class; it has for example been an assumption of J.K Galbraith, underlying much of his public comment. It may (as an illustration) be possible for marketers to persuade people to buy houses made of wattle and daub (a mixture of mud and cow dung) in the medieval fashion, but only if marketing communications could exploit an underlying yearning for authenticity and tradition, and only if such an appetite existed in the first place.

If Abela is indeed interpreting cause as a sufficient condition for bringing about the effect, we would deny marketing in itself is a sufficient condition to induce strong materialistic values among consumers in society. Is Abela saying that: if marketing, always strong materialistic values in society? This is to credit marketing with more power than it possesses. It all ties in with the claim that marketing can create wants without our having an underlying appetite for the product. As we say in the original paper, this assertion assumes a hypodermic model of consumption behavior, that is, consumers are motivationally empty until injected by marketers with wants. But marketing, to be effective, must tap into the target audience's motives.

But might Abela be also interpreting one cause, marketing, as a necessary condition for the success of materialism? Since a necessary condition for success, if absent, is a sufficient condition for failure, Abela may be implicitly arguing materialism would never take root without marketing. To the contrary, we would argue that materialism, but not strong materialism, is a basic dispositional feature of people in all societies ever since the first beginnings of organized human communities. The accrual of possessions symbolizes status, and all peoples seek status as power and status go together. The cornucopia of Tutunkhamun's tomb may have represented an assemblage of possessions denotive of absolute status and authority. But as archaeologists retrieve more of the distant past they become more aware of the existence of a proto-consumer culture as they establish the extent of trade routes (see for example, Loeb Classical Library, 1924) and the ubiquity of vanity possessions even among the comparatively humble of the ancient world. For example one of these authors was told by an archaeologist in Hyderabad that about 30,000 Roman objects/artifacts had been found in India, which was never part of the Roman Empire. In a book we quoted, Mary Douglas claims one purpose of possessions is to serve as a live information system to signal to others the owner's self-image, rank and values (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). This is an important message that consumers wish to send.

Today, goods are a way of signaling our identity and they help us integrate socially (both "standing out" and "standing in"). With the collapse of old social hierarchy we project our public self in new ways but still through the agency of the material. Our search for them represents the insecurity and social isolation consequent on historic destruction of folk culture and static social groupings. In *A Distant Mirror* Barbara Tuchman (1987) has well described how the scarcity (and thus higher price) of labor consequent upon medieval Europe's black death changed the power balance between peasant and proprietor, celebrated by the former through choosing to wear bright colors and other revolutionary sartorial features such as pointed shoes. Thus goods, whose purpose was once only functional or denotation (our place in some social hierarchy), now celebrate aspirational status, or fantasies (take the wondrous "tail fin" car architecture in 1950s US). Looked at this way, our materialism represents not merely indulgence but a search for affiliation, security and the like. Overt materialism masks what is ultimately a search for social goals; seeking, consuming, discarding has become our way of life ("shop till you drop", the culture of consumerism). This is seen particularly in the lives of the rich (where the material is the passport to the social and enables elite social interaction to occur).

Claim 3

The accusation that marketing, the consumer society, and hedonism claims that no alternatives to the current system that are consistent with human freedom appear to exist. Speculation as to what such an alternative would actually look like immediately suggests its infeasibility as a practical proposition and its unacceptability as a moral one. Attempts of course have been made, and not only the obvious one of Soviet Russia. Milder versions, such as the institutionalizing of rationing in the UK between 1939 and 1955, elicit no fond memory or desire to go back there. Idealistic historians remember their fairness, cynical ones their corruption. What is undoubtedly true is that Sovietism failed because, ultimately, it failed to give plausible expression to consumer aspirations (this is a more convincing explanation than that of the arms race). If, say, the Kremlin had to make 11 million price decisions centrally rather than use market signals as a

price mechanism/resource allocation method, the explanation for such frustration becomes apparent.

This then is the one accusation to which we plead guilty since we do claim that no pragmatic alternative exists without diminishing the freedom to choose. While agreeing that possessions will not ensure happiness or contentment, some level of material sufficiency (home heating in winter for example) is necessary for being reasonably satisfied. Furthermore, we agree that the frantic pursuit of possessions does not bring happiness. It even seems that the intense tracking of happiness through the elixir of material possession is apt to result in its opposite – discontent and guilt. It seems each person has a certain equilibrium point, probably determined by the genes, to which he or she returns after deviations resulting from good or bad episodes in life. We endorse a verse learnt at school:

Not for us are content, and quiet, and peace of mind, For we go seeking a city that we shall never find (Nicholson and Lee, 1917).

While most people would support this, in practice, some individuals behave as if they are the exception in that pursuing more and more material possessions will in fact provide more happiness (“he who dies with most toys wins”).

What to do? Even if we thought this was a key societal issue, we believe there is not much we can do about it in a democratic society. Abela thinks we surrender this point far too easily and complacently, apparently believing, like Plato, that with knowledge comes virtue; so that publicly demonstrating that our superfluities feed our discontents, or that strong materialistic values are dysfunctional to a satisfying life, will change popular behavior (similarly, Kasser suggests offering alternative visions of values to make people happier; values that promote self-acceptance, good relationships and contributions to community). Both seem to us to be jejune.

Abela finds support for his position in the success of the campaign to stop smoking. He offers this as a realistic strategy for getting consumers to forsake a materialistic life style; a strategy, too, that is consistent with freedom since the reliance it places on persuasion rather than coercion is thereby supportive of the ethos of democracy. But does this really strengthen his position; surely the campaigns such as Proposition 99 in California succeeded (www.library.ucsf.edu/tobacco) because these were exemplary marketing campaigns, exploiting the richness and diversity of marketing’s concepts, techniques and technologies? On what logic can this therefore be used as an argument against marketing? Marketing is a distinct genre under the larger category of persuasion: as such, it can sell less as well as more. It can integrate the ethical into the material calculus – for example the rise of “green” marketing or Marks & Spencer’s current – and very public – “ethical values” campaign (“There’s nothing woolly about our commitment to animal welfare”, *Daily Express*, March 9, 2006).

Does the cigarette model translate to anti-consumerism? To answer this question we need to consider the reasons for the unexpected triumphs of the campaign against smoking. In social science we are always better at explaining success ex-post facto than predicting it, since ex post facto we can see what sensitizing concepts and findings from social science apply to the specific context. It is the same with looking at the anti-smoking campaign. The campaign against smoking was tied to emotional appeals. The fear appeal was in the forefront. To put consumers into a state of fear, the anti-smoking campaign dramatized the physical consequences of smoking: heart attack, lung cancer and wrinkled skin. But fear appeals need to demonstrate credibility,

which was initially damaged in this case when smokers had the alternative of choosing to believe cigarette manufacturers who for years denied the harmful effects of smoking. Once manufacturers accepted that cigarettes were harmful, this made the government warning on that packet of cigarettes much more meaningful. The anti-smoking campaign also recruited the sense of shame. To the private emotions of fear were added the public emotions of shame. To feel this is to feel exposed to condemnation for breaking a taboo that a person feels obligated to uphold. In this case, it was the taboo on harming others in the pursuit of individual pleasure. Or, if the smoker was not ashamed, he or she would at least be embarrassed, in that embarrassment arises from perceptions of doing something that is socially gauche. The appeal of public altruism was superadded to that of private survival. There was more. Some would argue that the campaigns only became really effective, especially with youth, where the focus was on the socially dysfunctional consequences for the individual of nicotine addiction: bad breath, yellow teeth and so on.

The question that immediately comes to mind is why the campaign against drug-taking was relatively ineffective (see for example the Harvard Business School case "Boston fights drugs", Rangan and Lawrence, 1987, 1994)? In the first place, drugs provide instant gratification. And those with low self-esteem seem slower to react to fear appeals, as if they have difficulty coping with anything threatening (Leventhal, 1970). But these strictures also apply to cigarettes. But most important of all, the drug culture is a distinct sub-culture with its own social norms, with less opportunity to dampen usage through emotional appeals stressing shame and embarrassment. In fact, taking drugs has been the "cool" thing to do for those recruited to the drug scene. There is the phenomenon of group reinforcement of conduct that lies outside the socially acceptable; the risk is intrinsic to the appeal and represents a kind of perverse courage. The illicit is part of the fun: if some act is unlawful, it is by definition rebellion.

Conclusions

We are now in a better position to explain why the anti-smoking model does not apply in the case of reducing materialism. It is a vain hope to believe we can make consumers fearful that having more possessions or having strong materialistic values will make them less happy with their life. We claim that it is not a realistic goal for marketing persuasions to change society's attachment to an affluent life style. But we agree that it would be desirable if there were less absorption with material possessions. In fact, in our article we quoted Frank (1999):

... that the pleasures from consumption are both relative and fleeting. Moving to a relatively better house provides pleasure only for a short time, namely, until the new level of luxury seems routine or one's neighbor goes one better. The pleasure derived from owning any house or any other possession is tied to the status attached to owning such a house relative to those owned by neighbors. Frank uses the metaphor of the arms race to characterize conspicuous consumption because it is motivated by a desire to keep up with the Joneses. He concludes that consumers in affluent societies would be more content if less was spent on luxury goods, resulting in less of a need to work long hours and more time spent with families ...

"Materialism" covers a spectrum of human behavior. We are interpreting the term as "broad" as distinct from "narrow", and we would argue that man has always sought quicker and more efficient routes to satisfaction and to save labor. His/ her need for goods is determined by:

- the search for identity;
- the need for show – the self-presentation of the individual;
- desire for aesthetic consumption;
- wish to save labor;
- the wish to reduce the cost of service elements in consumption;
- the need for space saving and minituarization;
- the desire to save time;
- marking occasions; and
- marking gratitude.

Seen in this light, “broad” materialism simply becomes a part of our humanity. To identify it with hedonism is facile. No religion has ever represented hedonism as the source of satisfaction, and no philosophical system (apart from the Epicurean). But much hedonism or (voracious) pleasure seeking is actually non-material (indeed the US Constitution itself mandates that we “pursue” happiness!). “Narrow” materialism can indeed be seen as a perspective on life and a form of action, a value orientation, but that is not what we had in mind and few intelligent advocates would articulate it as a satisfying prescription for living.

This debate is bigger than us as marketing academics. The alleged marketing/materialism nexus is the new target of the global left, subsumed under the “anti-globalisation” banner, with violent anti-G8 demonstrations and attacks on alleged symbols of the global order such as McDonalds by activists such as Jose Bove of the Small Farmers Confederation in France (www.news.yahoo.com April 13, 2006), or the criticisms of Gap and Nike. Then there is the green critique – summarized as “consume less and save the planet”; or that of the churches – “live simply that others may simply live”. The significance of this argument about world-wide attitudes on consumption is that it ultimately represents an attack on marketing. That is why there was value in our writing the original article, why it was worth Abela replying to us, and why it is worthwhile for us in turn to address his selective points.

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