

## **Consumerism and Non-Rational Persuasion in Marketing and Advertising: A Perspective from Business Ethics**

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### **Abstract**

Business is an economic activity of making, buying, selling or supplying goods or services. Marketing and Advertising are the two important business practices that enable the contact between the seller and the buyer for a market transaction of goods and services. Both parties in the transaction of goods and services prefer to give up something of value in return for something that they value more. However, in the competitive business world, the marketers do at times overstep the ethical boundaries to achieve the market transaction. In view of this, I have made an ethical assessment of some issues in marketing and advertising pertaining to the need for free and fair market transaction that gets disrupted because of manipulative and deceptive practices in general and non-rational persuasion of children through television advertisements in particular.

### **Keywords**

Marketing Ethics, Advertising Ethics, Freedom of Choice of Consumer, Adequate Information Requirement, Consumerism, Non-rational Persuasion, Impact of Marketing and Advertising.

### **1. Introductory Remarks**

Marketing and Advertising are two important business practices. Marketing is needed to arrange for the flow of goods and services from the producer to the consumer and advertising - a tool of marketing - is a form of communication for information and persuasion. The range and influence of marketing and advertising are growing in proportion to the expansion of business activities and correspondingly the scope of marketing ethics and advertising ethics is increasing to maintain value-oriented stance of marketing and advertising. The value-oriented stance gets disrupted, particularly when marketers indulge in non-rational

persuasion as for example the influence of Television Advertisements on children is a matter of concern in advertising ethics, especially in the context of Indian society. The ethical assessment of issues in marketing and advertising begins with the paper with a brief on the nature of marketing and advertising for an understanding of relevant moral concerns and goes on to trace the issues of the impact of advertising and non-rational persuasion especially in the context of the expanding influence of television advertising on children.

## **2. Ethical Concerns in Marketing and Advertising**

We live in a world of business and the business world is a world of marketing. Since marketing is a performance of those activities which ensure the flow of goods or services from the producer to the user, considering business as a mere act of manufacturing is grossly inadequate. Unless the producer is good at marketing the product, he or the product cannot survive in the business world for long. Marketing is a long drawn process. It begins right at the stage of the development of the product and continues through product placement, product price and product promotion.

Ethical concerns do emerge along the line of long drawn process of marketing that may well be appreciated through an understanding of three ethical concepts, namely fairness, freedom and well-being.<sup>1</sup>

The requirement of fairness demands that each party in the business transaction acts freely and has adequate information. These two concerns imply that the transaction in business is expected to be mutually beneficial and based upon the assumption that there is no manipulation or deception in sharing of information about the product or service. No party in the transaction lacks competence; children, for example, lack rational ability to evaluate the product or service. And theoretically the responsibility for sharing information about the product or service rests upon either the seller or buyer even though in practice it is well expected that the seller should largely own the responsibility because the seller can afford to acquire the requisite information at a lesser cost. Information is important so long as lack of information leads to harmful effects on the consumer or hinders rational decision making of the buyer. The buyer or the consumers lack freedom when he or she is deprived of the options to buy or avail the product or service. Generally, freedom is denied when marketers indulge in manipulative or deceptive practices and most often

exploit the innocence or ignorance of certain populations such as children, poor or the elderly. The third concept of well-being raises the concerns of product safety and the impact of products or even advertising itself on the individual and the society as such.

Anyhow, the whole chain of marketing is considered to be important, but the promotion of the product is given a special treatment. There are many promotional activities such as advertising, press releases, contests, coupons, free samples, personal selling and so on. And it goes without saying that advertising is the first in the list of promotional activities.

Advertising is a tool of marketing to inform and persuade the potential consumer to buy the product. A textbook definition of advertising is that it is a “paid non-personal communication about an organization and its products that is transmitted to a target audience through a mass medium.”<sup>2</sup> It is a form of communication wherein the consumer is persuaded to be a regular user and if possible be a loyal carrier of the product - especially its brand name. He is persuaded not only to buy, for instance, Cadbury chocolate, but also say no to other brands of chocolates.

### **3. Influence on Human Mind, in Advertising**

Advertisers create a bridge between the product and its user. They try various means and ways to send the message about the product or the company to the target audience. They present the product in an advertisement and for the purpose they make the advertisement entertaining, informative, and most of all worth emulating. If the characters in the advertisement are happy eating Maggi noodles, then the target audience is indirectly persuaded to emulate the characters to experience the same feeling. Thus, advertising in a way is an attempt to hypnotize human mind in the shortest available time. It is a tough task for advertisers indeed.

It is not easy to capture the attention of the target audience, especially when they are busy in their respective chores of life. Somebody may be watching intently a cricket match, an episode of a serial, or a movie. Somebody may be reading a newspaper or a magazine for information and entertainment or just moving on the road to reach at a destination. In between, the advertiser has to hold the attention of the person for a short while to convey the message. It is even difficult to achieve the objective in the former case that is through electronic media because the person

holds the remote control in his hand to change the channel of programs appearing on the television screen.

The advertisers anyway continue making attempts at communicating the message more and more effectively. They take care in focusing on target audiences. They introduce entertainment, relevant characters, celebrities, requisite emotions, proper appearance of the product and so on. In case people are appreciating advertisements of Pepsi, Coke, Cadbury, Boost, or Kurkure it is because one or more elements mentioned above, of advertisement making, are hitting the target audience well.

#### **4. Crossing Ethical Boundaries in Consumerism and Non-rational Persuasion**

Be that as it may, advertising as a paid non-personal communication through a mass medium frequently crosses the boundaries of ethics and aesthetics. Generally, we don't realize that advertisers are making exaggerated claims, conveying outright falsehoods, presenting negative stereo-types of people, or promoting a culture of consumerism. The small children watch a boy on television flying after consuming Bournvita or growing quickly tall after drinking a cup of Complan, believe in the truth of the claims.

The advertisers go even further in creating an impact of advertising on persons by way of promoting a culture of consumerism – a culture of equating personal happiness with possession or consumption of goods or services. They convert humans into consumers, who interpret happiness to be that of status, success or acceptable appearance by way of a product or service. Owning a new model of Maruti Ciaz, wearing a suit of Reid and Taylor or using a tube of Fair and Handsome gets translated into status, success or appearance thereby giving a distinct feeling of happiness.

The advertisers don't stop at merely promoting a culture of consumerism, but try to strengthen it by way of non-rational persuasion in creating false needs or desires. They get into a whole lot of activities to make their advertisement appealing be it a study of human motivations and desires to develop a need for the product or an exploration of natural human desires for security, acceptance, self-esteem, and the like so as to influence consumer choices. They get into a whole lot of research to know the layers of the human mind to discover the right psychological

hook or the responses of a person in a social setting to connect a consumer choice.<sup>3</sup> Solomon's observation may be noted in this regard: The classic defense of the free market system is that it supplies and satisfies existing demands. But if manufacturers actually create the demand for the products they produce, then this classic defense is clearly undermined. Indeed, it has even been charged that advertising is itself coercive in that it interferes with the free choice of the consumer, who is no longer in a position to decide how best to satisfy his or her needs but, has instead been subjected to a barrage of influences which may well be quite irrelevant or even opposed to those needs. And even where the desirability of the product is not in question, there are very real questions about the advertising of particular brand names and the artificial creation of "product differentiation". And then there are those familiar questions of taste – on the borderline (and sometimes over) between ethics and aesthetics.<sup>4</sup>

## **5. Targeting of Children in Advertising**

The strengthening of a culture of consumerism and non-rational persuasion in creating wants themselves go on and in fact these two begin early in the life of a consumer. The advertisers target children right from their early age, say four or five years and it continues well into their adulthood. A child comes *in the line of fire early* in his life. The moment he begins to focus his eyes on television, he is caught in the web of advertisements on screen. He happens to watch various objects of his immediate interest flying on the screen – toys, food and confectionery items, dresses and games. He doesn't really distinguish one object from another, but of course gradually goes into a perpetual state of wanting that pushes him to adopt a posture of demand. He asks for Cadbury or Kitkat - whatever is shown first, wants to eat MacDonald burger from the look of it no matter if it contains excess fat or salt.

The advertisers capture the curiosity feature of human nature that is found fully operational in the beginning of one's life. A child feels curious after watching an object on a television screen and as per natural force of human nature asks for the object. He wants to eat, drink, enjoy or even possess the object. He begins to ask for a Pepsi drink or Kwality ice-cream or a round of venue of games to have a direct experience of the object. And from pre-school onwards the curiosity feature gets supplemented by social image. He wants to be famous too! He goes on to add on the list of goods to show off his possessions. The advertisers

exploit this urge to have an edgy experience of being famous and present their capsules of advertisements to hit the target audience.

On the other side, the advertisers make use of trends such as smaller family size, dual incomes and postponing children later in life that mean families have more disposable income. And time-stressed parents play a permissive part in the game of advertisements to overcome their sense of guilt, which influence their buying decisions.<sup>5</sup>

The children represent an important demographic segment. The reasons are three: First, the children, especially in the 7-14 age groups can buy goods. They get various monetary allowances, particularly in a nuclear family environment that empowers them to directly buy the desired product. Second, they can influence their parents to buy something for their exclusive use or for common use in the house such as a pizza in a fast food joint or a particular television model for the house. Third and last, they can continue consuming a product, Maggi noodle for instance; later in their life.<sup>6</sup>

This is why many business companies incorporate matching features in their promotional campaigns to lure the segment of children. Child carrying money to his school to drink a bottle of Pepsi in the recess period proves a point of success for the company. A grown up boy saying in the advertisement – Inseparable Bond (Atut Rishta) - he cannot see someone driving his family car, Hyundai Santro, despite the fact that he brings in the new model of Hyundai Santro. In a way he and other family members in the advertisement persuade the Indian middle class family to stick to the model Hyundai Santro shown on the screen. And a child developing a taste for Cadbury chocolate or MacDonald burger early in his life continues with the taste for the product well late in his life.

The advertisers do not care if children start losing their childhood or from faulty eating habits. It is observed that “children’s dressing up and dancing to the tunes of adults makes one wonder about the innocence lost. Early use of lipstick, glitter makeup, branded apparel and use of heeled shoes are such examples.”<sup>7</sup> And the promoters of food and beverages nowhere inform that such items contain higher levels of sugar, salt and fat.

The values such as pride, sense of appreciation and gratefulness that children form in this whole influence, creating exercise are found to be rooted in materialism, impatience, and pragmatism. They want to quickly buy and consume goods. They learn to be consumers and hardly find time to learn to be good citizens. Gradually they come in the grip of the power to buy goods and that determines their way of life – a life of a consumer.

## **6. Persuasion of Children in Advertising**

The defenders of advertising argue as if there is nothing wrong if business companies adopt various techniques to promote their products. They contend that people anyway develop their needs or desires over a period of time in a social setting. Why do we have to raise objections to the art of advertising only? And since advertising is an art it will not be a claim to replicate reality and an element of entertainment will be indispensable. However, Solomon says that “in an ideally functioning free market the only advertising that should be either necessary or permitted is pure information regarding the use and qualities of the product.”<sup>8</sup> And in case we go further we may add that advertising is for rationally persuading the target audience. The debates in regard to ethics and aesthetics appear on the scene when certain advertisements contain false information and non-rational persuasion.

In fact, the element of non-rational persuasion in advertising assumes an alarming proportion the moment it targets children. As we all know rationality is a capacity for evaluating a given state of affairs that humans develop later in their life. Humans are considered to be non-rational in the early stage of their life. If this is true, children are not expected to correctly evaluate the content of advertisements. More so when the given advertisement is conveying the message through images which can easily bypass the rational capacities of even adult persons. We do not expect a child who is below 14 years of age to evaluate the product in the advertisement for its food value or value for money. He cannot make out the misrepresented size or appearance of the product or missing information about the product. A television advertisement, for instance, showing a smart looking child using a Pears Soap in his clean bathroom in the house naturally attracts children to aspire to get the soap. Any attempt at persuasion of children in the advertisement, thus, amounts to non-rational persuasion.<sup>9-10</sup>

## **7. Concluding Remarks**

To conclude, marketing ethics and advertising ethics refer to a value-oriented reflective stance to examine the nature and influence of business practices in marketing and advertising. However, it may be noted that certain business practices involving non-rational persuasion create wants themselves instead of merely satisfying the wants and through relentless advertising campaigns create consumers right from the early stage of human beings as children. We humans, whether in the role of producers, marketers, advertisers, consumers or parents cannot wish it away. The solution lies in self-discipline, education and adequate amendments in the legal system. Self-discipline requires that advertisers must exercise self-restraint and make use of true information and rational persuasion. The parents, teachers and other responsible citizens may take corrective measures and keep educating children for true information and requisite attitudinal change.

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