Doing well while doing good? An integrative review of marketing criticism and response

Verena E. Stoeckl [a,*], Marius K. Luedicke [b]

[a] Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, University of Innsbruck, School of Management, Universitaetsstrasse 15, 6020 Innsbruck, Austria
[b] Cass Business School, City University London, 106 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8TZ, UK

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Looking back at a century of innovation, the marketing profession has reason to celebrate its many contributions to the rise of economic wealth in Western nations. The marketing profession has, however, as well faced criticism for engaging in ever-new marketing practices potentially harming individuals, communities, and societies. This paper presents findings from an integrative literature review to document key criticisms of marketing brought forth over sixty years; to identify the key moral demands that fuel these criticisms; and to illustrate the potentialities and limitations of positive marketing responses. The study suggests that positive marketing practices more often than not result from marketers' proactive engagement with critical narratives and emerging moral demands.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +43 512 507 7209; fax: +43 512 507 2842.
E-mail addresses: verena.stoeckl@uibk.ac.at (V.E. Stoeckl), m.luedicke@city.ac.uk (M.K. Luedicke).

1. Introduction

In the last two centuries, Western societies have experienced unprecedented growth of economic activity, technological possibilities, and human living standards. Since around 1910, this development coincides not only with path-breaking technological and managerial innovations, but also with the rise of marketing theory and practice. The inventive minds of marketing practitioners, educators, and researchers have apparently played an important role in creating ever new forms of market exchanges that satisfy customer needs, wants, and desires in ever new ways and, thus, generate financial income for employees, company owners, investors, and governments (Bagozzi, 1975; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2002). From this perspective, marketing practice appears as an inherently positive force that contributes to uplifting the world by creating services of value for organizational stakeholders, individuals, and society (Lerman & Shefrin, 2014; Vargo & Lusch, 2004).

Since the late 1930s, however, consumers, academics, activist groups, and public pundits have been calling attention to emerging marketing ideologies and practices that seem to produce more problems for consumers and their environments than they solve (see Cross, 2000; Dameron, 1938; Slater, 1997; Tadajewski, 2010). Critics, for example, address issues with corporations deliberately selling products that jeopardize their buyers' health (Varey, 2010); invading, exploiting, or homogenizing local communities (Fournier & Avery, 2011; Klein, 1999; Rumbo, 2002; Thompson & Arsel, 2004); or erecting veneers of social and ecological stewardship to conceal natural and human resource exploitation practices (Saha & Darnton, 2005).

Over time, some criticisms persist, whereas others rise and fade under changing cultural, social, economic, and environmental conditions (Hertz, 2001). Several marketing practices that consumers regarded as legitimate only a while ago are now considered detrimental to consumers' health, community spheres, and human or natural resources. For example, consumers have formerly tended to welcome advertising billboards as valuable sources of information, to cheer extra gas-thirsty vehicles with wing-like fenders as signs of progress, and to celebrate chain-smoking movie characters as beacons of coolness. Under today's moral conditions, consumers are more likely to culture-jam advertisements posted in the wrong places (but spend more time researching their favorite brands online), to admire hybrid cars (but fly more), and adore movie characters that do without smoke (but who are more violent).

However, not only do the moral demands for legitimate marketing practice change, but also the ways in which these morals are expressed and affect marketing practice. Recent innovations in communication technology allow consumers to assess marketing practices more comprehensively and to respond more directly and influentially to unwanted practices (Abela & Murphy, 2008; Holt, 2002). When critical consumers spot corporate transgressions of legitimate practice, they tend to no longer mobilize local peers for local boycotts with limited consequences, but rather run global social media campaigns that can severely damage their target's reputation and bottom line (Carducci, 2006; Friedman, 2004; Sokolowsky, 2010).

For marketers, this shifting moral and critical landscape evokes substantial insecurities with regards to which emerging demands may, or may not, imply significant consequences for their marketing practices. Even though this terrain remains somewhat nebulous and dynamic, marketers who are interested in doing well while doing good may still

benefit from gaining clarity about 1) which marketing practices are most widely criticized in Western consumers' cultures, 2) which underlying moral demands drive these criticisms, 3) how consumers express these moral demands in their resistance projects, and 4) how marketers can turn criticism into positive marketing practice to better serve consumers, companies, and society's interest (Lerman & Shefrin, 2014).

The present study approaches these complex questions by means of an extensive, integrative literature review of 225 papers, 48 books, and 16 newspaper articles associated with academic, activist, or popular media criticisms of marketing practice, as well as with consumers' responses to undesirable marketing practice. This undertaking contributes a potentially useful overview and reflection of this complex subject matter for marketing practitioners and researchers, and yields four theoretical contributions:

First, the study collects, integrates, and reflects knowledge gained from a broad range of dispersed literatures on marketing criticisms, consumer resistance practices, and marketing responses within four domains in which marketing impacts consumers' lives—the consumer, the community, the society, and the human and natural resource domain. Second, the paper identifies six key moral demands that fuel a broad range of specific criticisms and consumer responses in these four domains. Third, by adopting a macro analytical perspective, this research suggests that marketers more often than not draw proactively, rather than reactively, on emerging moral demands for exploring new, positive marketing opportunities. Fourth, this review shows that consumer resistance and positive marketing practices symbiotically contribute to spurring cultural debates on emerging moral demands and thus address the key ethical challenges of contemporary consumer societies.

2. Method

The insights reported in this study are based on an extensive, integrative review of literatures from the fields of marketing, branding, consumer culture, and marketing in society theory (Ladik & Stewart, 2008; MacInnis, 2011). Between July 2011 and October 2012, the authors identified and analyzed publications from EBSCO, JSTOR, and SSCI databases that broadly addressed notions such as "consumer resistance," "morality," "ethics," and "social responsibility" with regard to marketing practice and criticism. The resulting data set included 420 academic articles that covered about sixty years of academic debate and a broad range of academic fields (see Table 1). Studies included from the field of consumer culture theory, for example, offered important insights into consumer resistance against corporate capitalism and the institutional role of marketing (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, 2007). Articles drawn from marketing in society research contributed critical reflections on the role of societal interests in the marketing field (c.f., Wilkie & Moore, 2012). And studies derived from marketing

Table 1
Overview of academic fields and relevant themes included in this review.

Academic fields	Relevant themes
Consumer culture theory	Mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies; marketplace cultures
Marketing in society research	Ethics; sustainability; quality of life, consumer welfare; corporate social responsibility
Marketing and branding theory	Marketing ideology; brand logic; critical marketing