

**Is Encouraging Materialism  
the “unethical side” of Marketing?**

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# Is Encouraging Materialism the “unethical side” of Marketing?

Αποτελεί την «ανήθικη  
πλευρά» του μάρκετινγκ η  
ενθάρρυνση του υλισμού;

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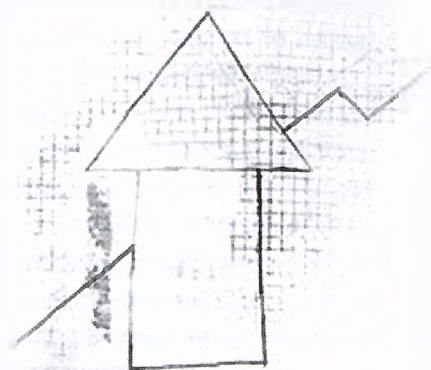
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## Περίληψη

Η επιστήμη του μάρκετινγκ έχει προκαλέσει πολλές διαφωνίες ως προς την ηθική της διάσταση. Οι επικριτές του μάρκετινγκ μιλούν για ενθάρρυνση του υλισμού δηλαδή της τάσης των καταναλωτών να βρίσκουν ευτυχία μόνο στα υλικά αγαθά που αγοράζουν. Αντίθετα, οι υποστηρικτές του μάρκετινγκ τονίζουν ότι ο υλισμός επηρεάζεται από χαρακτηριστικά της προσωπικότητας του καταναλωτή και όχι από τις πρακτικές του μάρκετινγκ. Το παρόν άρθρο αναπτύσσει με κριτικό τρόπο τις απόψεις τόσο των επικριτών και υποστηρικτών του μάρκετινγκ πάνω στο συγκεκριμένο ζήτημα.

Marketing's philosophy is inspired by customer orientation and satisfaction and helps to stimulate demand for products and services (Chisnall, 1985). Its aim is to know and deeply understand the customer so well, that the product or service fits him completely (Nantel, 1996).

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Investigating the consumers' needs, marketing motivates the production of the right products, which will satisfy these needs. It helps to stimulate supply and demand for products and services and therefore helps the development of the economy (Maliaris, 1990). Marketing also increases the wealth of business institutions, their ability to make capital improvements and invest in research and development, which in turns leads to greater productivity, technological breakthroughs, innovations and higher standards of living. Nowadays, marketing has enabled people to enjoy products which once were considered luxuries, such as mobile phones, cars, even special kind of food.

Although marketing policies and practices have been largely responsible for the high standard of living today, it has been controversial. As it affects many people in many ways, marketing is a discipline that provokes many debates (Nantel, 1996). There are researchers and practitioners who strongly dislike marketing activity, accusing it of being unethical, ruining the natural environment, attacking the public with absurd advertisements and encouraging materialism in many ways.

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The American marketing system has been especially accused of contributing to some social "bads" in American society, specifically excessive materialism, false wants, and cultural pollution (Kotler, 1980). Many researchers believe that marketing in America creates an "irregular" interest in material possession. People tend to judge others by what they own and they are not considered successful unless they own a second home, two cars and the most modern clothes and appliances.

The consumption-based orientation to happiness through the purchasing of material goods is commonly labelled as materialism. It has generally been a Western and American feature that has achieved a prominent place in industrial and post-industrial life. Belk (1985) conceptualises materialism as "the importance a consumer attaches to worldly possessions. At the highest levels of materialism, such possessions assume a central place in a person's life and are believed to provide the greatest sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Richins and Dawson (1992) and Graham (1999) believe that materialism is a vital organising value, which leads to three different types of value points of reference: acquisition, possession and centrality. Materialism is strongly connected with the satisfaction someone gets from the acquisition and possessions of goods and is related to the passion for making purchases. Materialism is connected with the way by which someone pursues economic objectives (Graham, 1999). Materialistic

consumers expect the acquisitions and possessions to improve their well being (Richins et al., 1992). Highly materialistic people give more emphasis on the impressions they make on others (Christopher, 2005). Participants in materialistic cultures have been characterised as an acquisitive and downright mobile. They work long hours and they save money to satisfy obsessive desires for whatever the next enviable material good may be, a new car, an electrical equipment, e.t.c (Richins, 1987).

Materialism is often linked to marketing phenomena both at an individual and social level (Evrard, 1998). Marketing has been described as an attempt to make people envious and obsessive. It may also induce awareness of social status and suggest status correlation with acquiring promoted or advertised products (Belk and Pollay, 1985).

Enemies of marketing claim that consumers exposed heavily to advertising would overestimate the material well being of typical consumer because advertising show images of materially well off consumers. They make the accusation that marketing and especially advertising influences people to find the life's importance in the products they purchase. The habitual connection of products with happy consumers in advertising may provoke a belief that material possessions bring about happiness. The recurrent exposure to prosperous, well-off and happy people produces a false reality, in which uncommon and ideal become routine and achievable (Richins et al., 1992). In this way, consumers exposed to heavy dosage of advertising would be more likely to value material possessions.

Rotzoll (1992) and Belk and Pollay (1985) believe as well that marketing encourages materialism. They contend that marketing promotes envy and creates anxiety. Furthermore, they asserts that marketing uses an impersonal form of persuasion and that envy related to consumption is stimulated and reinforced by marketing. They also believe that marketing motivates irrational sales schemes and support greed.

While critics have expansively argued about the bad effects of marketing, there is almost no empirical evidence on proving these immoral effects. Researchers, who argue that marketing promotes materialism, do not cite many empirical studies investigating whether exposure to marketing influences consumers to value material goods more than they would do otherwise (Richins, 1987).

Nantel (1996) has noted that materialism is the "shame" of marketing. Marketing nourishes the consumer power of man. It does not encourage materialism seeing that it creates wants for a better standard of living and "sets

up before a man the goal for a better home, better clothing and better food" as Kotler (1980) describes. The philosophy that guides marketing efforts as well as the marketing's goals are antithetical with the concept of materialism.

The defenders of marketing, characterises it as being "society's saviour" (Kotler, 1980) and it cannot be accused for producing materialism. Marketing promotes the ideology and freedom of choices (Rotzoll, 1992). It motivates, but does not "push" consumers to buy and it does not make people envious and possessive. On top of that, the consumer is always free to keep away from marketing activities, by turning the page, changing the channel or avoiding a salesman.

Materialism, as a concept that characterises the general relationship between an individual and the material world surrounding him, is the manifestation of three personality traits: possessiveness, nongenerosity and envy. Individual materialism is measured by weigh levels of these three traits (Belk, 1985). Hence, materialism is an amalgam of personality traits rooted in the importance of the role of objects in subjective personally (Evrard, 1998). Stimuli of the kind found in marketing may have partial control over consumers' behaviour; the main source of control is the contingencies themselves; the reinforcements available when particular responses are made.

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Foxall (1990) believes that individual must have tendency to behave in a certain way before the discriminative stimuli contained in a message can exert control. No matter how important stimuli contained in persuasive marketing message communication may be, such promotional message cannot influence behaviour. This kind of behaviour may have been learnt by direct exposure to contingency. Marketing is not the highly powerful medium, as it is believed. It doesn't contain such power to change individuals' manners and actions and certainly cannot influence personality traits as the three components of materialism are. Wong, (1997) also supports this argument by saying that none of the three belief domains which Belk describes are tied to marketing and generally to consumption

Evrard (1998) conducted a research in order to find out which factors influence materialistic behaviour. He came up to the conclusion that only demographics influence materialism (when age increases, the importance of material possession is substituted by other values, like family happiness). He also found that attitudes towards marketing are exclusively linked to social and cultural variables and not materialistic variables. Materialistic orientation may positively influence attitudes towards

advertising and not other components of the marketing system (Evrard, 1998). Rotzoll (1992) also tried to investigate the relationship between exposure to marketing and material values. The relationship was very weak as the correlation between the exposure variables and wide-ranging material values were not significant.

Advertising, among the marketing components has been mostly accused that encourages materialism. Richins's (1992) accusations of the idealised images of advertising which provoke materialistic tendencies were refuted by Belk and Pollay (1985). Belk and Pollay argue that most advertising is designed to be taken in as real and honourable. Even advertising that contains surrealistic implementations can be perceived as real to the degree that their creators are successful in connecting the viewer's willing postponement with disbelief.

The keen paradox for the marketing accusations has to do with the period of time that these accusations started. Marketing was first accused in the 1970s, a period which showed great economic accomplishments. It was just after president Kennedy sent the message to the Congress (in 1969) for defending the consumers' rights. In this period of time, Ralph Nader made the first steps to introduce consumerism. Nevertheless, the strong oppositions to marketing were created a little bit earlier than the appearance of the consumerism movement (Maliaris, 1990). If marketing verifiably encouraged materialism, the accusations would have been formed later in time, in an era when the interest in material possessions was a social characteristic. For example, in the 1980's, when there was a great increase in materialism.

Post-materialism is the tendency of individuals to de-emphasise material goods and in the same time to emphasise other human's needs, such as quality of life and expressiveness (Graham, 1999). Following this post-modern trend, marketing has become post-modern in practice (Firat et al, 1995). Seeing that postmodernity is taking a central place in modern life, marketing should be less accused for leading to materialism. By accepting the post-modern trend, we should admit as well that there is no evidence that marketing supports materialism. It can even be said that marketing, in certain circumstances, may discourage materialism. As marketing helps consumers to identify the products they need and wish to buy, it may also identify those products and brands they wish to avoid because of bad reports and experiences or just because these products are not essentially needed.

While the concept of materialism is more clearly understood to that it was a decade ago, it is difficult to specify precisely whether materialism is an antecedent of marketing. The intense accusation that marketing encourages materialism could be only accepted as a belief of demarketing. Demarketing is the activity that tries to reduce the demand for a product or service on a temporary or permanent basis. It uses the normal marketing tools in reverse, such as reducing availability, accessibility, advertising and service and increasing prices (Kotler, 1980). It aims to the reduction of consumption, as it believes that marketing leads to the distraction of the society.

The field of marketing, among all the management fields, raises the most controversy and it is wrongly accused for increasing materialism. Marketing is a balanced serving of the combined interests of sellers, buyers and citizens. Materialism is a mixture of personality traits, which according to many researches cannot be influenced by marketing variables. In addition, marketing supports the ideology of freedom and it merely gives motives for buying. Materialism is also a characteristic of less developed countries, where marketing is not expanded. It has to be admitted that marketing does not encourage materialism, as there are no evidence for proving this statement and additionally there are researches and statements that confirm the opposite. Marketing should not be considered as a materialism motivator.

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