

Is Marketing Moral?

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Abstract

This article focused on how moral values can be found in marketing. To some extent, we tried to see if the perspective of traditional ethics has changed in postmodernity and how we can still find moral values in today's life. In the first part, we considered how marketing is seen and perceived, both general and particular, with its moral dimensions. In the second part, we analyzed how ethics and explicit moral issues are found in Marketing. In the third part, we discussed the problem of immoral aspects in various marketing strategies. As we examined these aspects, we have concluded that postmodernity is relative in itself, but this does not mean that moral values are relative. Therefore, following this path, we concluded that marketing is moral as we try to observe it from a dynamic-postmodern perspective. From another perspective, if we appeal to fundamental moral values, we can say that there are moral shortcomings when reflecting on Marketing. We will discuss these perspectives in further detail.

Keywords: moral, marketing, ethics, postmodernity, needs, values, market-place

1. Moral values of Marketing

Kotler and Armstrong (2011) argue that Marketing can be found practically everywhere and it appears split into two categories: traditional marketing and modern marketing that tries to be "a part of you" by using a mobile phone, computer, etc. Today marketing's goal is not just to sell a product. It is about satisfying needs, desires, and demands. Technology has created a connection between the seller and the consumer because marketing research is much easier to collect (conduct). It relies on obtaining data from the consumer. Companies can adapt on the go to demand and offer. In this sense, they can sell not only a product, but also other services. Companies need to

maintain a close relationship with the customers because people can make emotional based choices. Also, failing to meet varying customer demands can cost a company as they might lose clients to the marketing tactics of competitors. Nowadays, this is an effective method, as a customer's information and interests are much more accessible than ever before. The previously mentioned facts are happening because these days, customers have easy access to information using the internet or social media. They can review others' opinions and, in some cases, use the product for a trial.

To provide the best customer service, Kotler describes five general concepts (the production, the product, the sales, the market, the social marketing). Those can be the basis of a marketing plan, applied in creating healthy relationships between the company and the customer. This method can result in a long-term value, satisfied customers and a high profit that remains constant for companies. Along these lines, the five dimensions of Marketing embrace an axiological vision.

At the same time, Baker and Hart (2008) state that everything is in a constant motion. The supply must vary because the needs are complex, and the demand is high. On the other hand, management is the one that supports the connection between technology and people and implicitly the axiological activity of companies.

An essential principle of marketing is to be consumer-orientated. Without considering that rule, there could be no space for the sale relationship itself. Putting the consumers first, satisfying their needs, and maintaining a strong relationship with them are the success factors for every marketing strategy. It is a time-consuming process, and the company must combine good quality products with a reasonably low production cost to ultimately make a profit. This practice, especially in social marketing, is about gathering axiological value and fair moral exchange between the parties, consumers, and companies (Donovan and Henley 2010).

Human values are much more significant in postmodernity. Marketing must embrace them and stop promoting perfection but consider that people are imperfect. Individuals are more than just consumers. In this dimension,

digital anthropology was born, helping companies find out the needs of people: social listening, human behavior analysis, and empathic research (Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan 2017). At the same time, we must not forget that advanced technology does not bring moral progress. This logic is often used to hide immoral or illegal intentions, pushing the boundaries / limits of the law. Technological progress, especially in anthropology and consumer behavior studies, can be used against human dignity. After all, as Kant pointed out, everything comes down to human dignity.

In the same line of thinking, the consumer society cannot exist if there are no moral precepts, if there is no axiological framework - which regulates, above all, the business world. It is a perspective - not only an axiological one, but also a pragmatic one. Without fundamental coherence, without appealing to moral values, economic activities could not occur, and social life could not exist. In these terms, moral values are essential. Although they are not palpable, they are not visible to the naked eye, they represent the cardinal points of our lives, the principles that govern social life.

Business ethics should also revolve around this formalism if ethics revolves around axiology. In other words, business ethics should be based on what Bellu (2012) would call 'elementary morality'. If human relations did not have a pillar of support, then business ethics would not be possible either. Business ethics normalizes, stages moral values, and brings them to light beyond the interests of the actors involved, thus forcing them to keep the business field intact. Moreover, business ethics, seen as an elementary morality, is necessary. In a world dominated by immoral, *barbaric* politics, (Colang, 2018), we need a moral framework, an honest game board not only for those directly involved in business, but also for those actively involved in social life, such as consumers, employees, social groups, and local communities. They all should be a base for setting the business ethics and the moral codes. Thus, in this keynote, the business ethics research field was born. In the literature – business ethics aims to regulate the rules and principles underlying economic activities. Some authors suggest that business ethics is a pure philosophical speculation on

economic principles. In contrast, others see it as an activity that considers the deontological framework of economic activities. What is certain is, in one form or another, any economic activity is reduced to the way the client is seduced. Here hermeneutics is essential to consumption and the phenomenology of the economic act – which involves deepening the practice in which any economic activity is carried out. In essence, the action takes place in the space of *appearance*, as we developed this topic in the article *A Hermeneutics of the Consumer* (Colang 2011). Hence, we will discuss how postmodern relativism can mislead us, so that we tend to postulate that there is no ethics in the economical sphere and, therefore, no axiological framework either.

2. Moral relativism

In opposition to the ancient period where moral values were linked to *goodwill* (Aristotle 2020, EEII67a), in postmodernity we have a moral relaxation in the sense that ethics is no longer absolute, but is relative. After all, starting from the Nietzschean relativism, postmodernity wants to emphasize subjectivism: “There are no moral phenomena at all, only a moral interpretation of phenomena.” (Nietzsche 2003, 96) Although it sounds contradictory, morality in marketing may or may not be ethical in this context. How is this possible? It is possible because postmodernity preserves the rigor of modernity, and implicitly, its values, will on the other hand, tends towards relativism. In other words, it is a moral game between Descartes' and Nietzsche's vision, in which life as a whole can be viewed in the most abstract sense, but to the same extent, it can be questioned at the level of social or moral norms.

For this reason, we have communication strategies that tend to seem ethical, but can still be moral. Following the same logic, there may be communication campaigns that may be immoral but viewed in a moral light. Moreover, we have many examples from business ethics, where we see different moral dimensions in immoral acts. It is all about retouching in marketing and communication.

Another relevant aspect of business ethics and how marketing can be considered moral, is a Kantian moral duty. Postmodernity instead, influences perspectives at the level of communication, but does not penetrate deeply into the moral dimensions. Simply put, Kantian moral duty is present in business, but it can be relativized from the perspective of John Stuart Mill's communication and utilitarianism. After all, R.M. Hare tried to achieve this, by bringing deontology into the space of utilitarianism. This means that business in today's world keeps a moral note, but is also pragmatic. Furthermore, we cannot say that society is profoundly immoral and relative. Instead, we have, as Bauman shows, a moral doubt and different perspectives on perceiving this cultural relativism, however this doesn't mean that we no longer have ethics, but rather a moral perspective (Bauman 2009).

Following this logic, we can state that relativism is rather cultural. Anything derived from this cultural relativism can only be relative. Therefore, we can firmly say that moral values are not relative, but their interpretation is. Thus, even in Nietzschean logic, perspectivism is the one that misleads us and makes us say that there are no ethics. After all, if we state that everything is relative, this statement is also relative. We refer inherently to specific values (epistemological, axiological and so on). Indeed, we cannot live without moral values, which means life has an axiological attribute.

Ontologically speaking, we are desperately looking for values without realizing that the paradigm of postmodernity means a lack of values. If everything is relative, as you hear at every corner, then there are no more moral norms, and if this is true anything is possible. You can love and cheat, you can steal and be honest, it doesn't matter. You can steal and be honest. Postmodernity allows you to violate the Manichaeism of the principle of non-contradiction, and that is a fact. You can do anything because it doesn't matter. It is enough to simply look on the street, where cultural relativism is already normalized. We do not say these things in a moralizing tone, but in a descriptive one because, in postmodernity, it no longer makes sense to talk about values if there are no more values or a meaning of those values. This is the current paradigm,

postmodernity, and the logic of *super-human*, when it comes to perfect ourselves, we will be completely devoid of feelings. Orwell's deep fear of not turning us into machinery will soon be attained. Now all that's left is a nano-technological discovery that puts us in God's place. And when we get there, we will realize that we are just human beings, but it will be too late. Religion gives you immortality in various forms. Politics tells you that everything can be at your fingertips, and science promises you in epistemic terms what religion promises in dogmatic terms. Ethics is the only field that promises nothing, it is not a profitable concept and that's why at times certain individuals choose to avoid it.

3. Immoral strategies of Marketing

Marketing is more than meets the eye. Over time two patterns have emerged. During the first, marketing is promoted aggressively, while the process of production and consumption camouflages the second. In the footsteps of Max Weber, Applbaum (2004) states that marketing has a special place in the economic and cultural development of capitalism.

Big companies want to have more benefits rather than take into account the needs of people. In such a way, the concept of marketing is unfortunately often omitted. The following problems arise: prices, brand name use, misleading consumer practices, aggressive ways of promotion, poor product quality, premature ageing of the product, and making a difference between social classes. In contrast, some companies promote the sustainability concept. This encourages the consumer to value what they already have and the moral values. Thus, they discourage consumerist thinking that can lead to the deprivation/erasure of the common good and affect society as a whole. Another immoral aspect is that through various less ethical marketing tactics, larger companies lead to the absorption of smaller companies, resulting in higher profits. (Kotler, Armstrong, and Harys 2020).

Evans and Moutinho (1999) show us that ethical decision-making occurs when a moral constituent is noticed within a problem. Ethical problems arise when companies think of their welfare: to make as much profit as possible and achieve

their goals even if it is not suitable for consumers. Issues also appear when they try to destroy other competitors. The most common problems are misleading advertising, manipulative and insistent sale channels, prices that insinuate to favor the consumer, etc.

On the other hand, imposture also appears because postmodernity takes place in the space of excessive relativism. Not only companies tend to evade things, but also people. It is a consumer society that is somehow reduced to a kind of relativism given by the market: "While he was impressed by the productivity of free markets, Adam Smith feared their moral hazards." (Gray 2008, 121) In this sense, if the society does not have a general axiological direction, i.e., directed toward moral norms, all the society's actors will tend to relativize the social game. Huizinga was telling us that even the game needs firm rules to exist and unfold, to be genuine, rigorous, and truthful. Therefore, the general tendency towards moral decline – is not an exclusive attribute of the pecuniary, of the economic zone but rather reflects the barbaric nature of man, his natural inclination to fake things and not to follow the rules. There is, however, to a degree a difference: one is when a person is immoral out of necessity and does not respect the moral rules, and another is when several companies aim to deceive customers. This is why it is evident that the negative impact on society is better seen when we consider the false practices of companies. In other words, we cannot speak of an axiological decline but instead a moral hazard, as Adam Smith asserted.

In a way, postmodernity must be understood in its renaissance key, or even better in a Dostoevskyian key with added Nietzschean fervor. This will give us the picture of modern life. In antiquity, the foundations were laid for what Christianity carried forward in the form of dogma. More precisely, the axiological skeleton of the world, its value foundation, was outlined. Whether there were gods, philosophers or priests, all in their specific language, were convening, that we cannot function without moral laws. This means that before religion, by law, some moral norms were outlined, which were then taken over by the conceptual frames (apparatus) and transformed into means for political, doctrinal,

religious, and legislative ideologies. And yet, for those who do not understand how we conduct our lives, there is a simple answer - beyond any legal or religious foundation - it is an axiological, moral fundament of life.

4. Conclusion

This article argued the idea that morality in postmodernity, although relative, does not mean relativizing moral values. Therefore, moral values remain known as society's goals. Despite the fact that postmodernity allows us to see all aspects of life, including the economic ones, subjectively, rules must exist in order to have a moral frame in the market. To draw an answer to the question that represents the title of this article, we can say that marketing is moral as long as it is not ethical. In what sense? In the sense of a *minimal morality* of our living day by day, but in the essence, it is clear that there are some ethical deficiencies. In a matter of speaking, postmodernity allows the principle of non-contradiction to be ignored, more precisely, to be or not to be moral simultaneously. Also, we can interpret this on a pragmatically level not just on an ontological one.

Drawing the line of this article, the discussion of ethics in Marketing is closely related to the fact that postmodernism takes place in the space of post-truth. While a strategy tends to become immoral, from an axiological point of view, also it can be interpreted - at the level of perception of the masses - as moral. Furthermore, this is possible because today's society is deeply relativized in a Nietzschean paradigm, where values are volatile. We are, somehow, in a dimension where anything is possible, but more than that, anything is allowed. At the same time, we live in a technological world, where information is present at every step. At the societal level, the tendency in this chain is to omit, to no longer perceive the axiological background without appealing to moral values. In a way, following Baumann's logic, postmodernity is relative, but the ethic cannot be relative. So, morality (mores) is relative at the level of projection of Marketing, but the ethic (ethos) can never be relative because that goes beyond any communication or promotion strategy.

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