**Revisiting 'Consumer Needs' in Marketing: A critical theory Perspective**

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**Abstract**

The discipline of marketing needs to critically engage itself in a self-reflexive interrogation with the objective of challenging the underlying assumptions (ontological and epistemological) and probing into the ideologies of the dominant paradigm. Such an engagement will infuse plurality in the understanding of marketing theory. To achieve this end, the paper draws heavily from the Marxist tradition and the subsequent Frankfurt and Foucauldian school of thought. This paper questions the concept of 'consumer needs' which are considered to be the very core of marketing. The profit orientation of marketing and the problem solving managerial focus has been looked through the frames of critical theory.

*Keywords:* Critical Marketing, Consumer Culture Theory, Consumer needs

**Revisiting 'Consumer Needs' in Marketing: A critical theory Perspective**

The predominant theories and methods in the field of marketing have been characterised by a lot of apprehension with regard to its aims and values (Levy, 2003). Paradigmatic pluralism, epistemological reflexivity and ontological denaturalization (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008) are considered to be some of the outcomes of a critical enquiry in the field of marketing. It has been suggested that marketing needs to focus on social welfare (Witkowski, 2005). At the same time it has also been opined that the institutional infrastructure and the ideological temperament of marketing are unwilling to alter themselves to include a critical framework (Tadajewski, 2008). Efforts to main-stream interpretive and revisionist paradigms may go in-vain[1]. The role of a critical enquiry is essential to keep the discipline in a constant state of flux where marketing has to "justify itself not only as a managerial discipline but also as a field of social enquiry" (Brownli, 2006). While the emergence of social marketing, sustainable marketing, ecological marketing etc looks like a critical strand in marketing literature but many like Crane & Desmond (2002) have argued that they are just an extension of the traditional marketing concept rather than a reconstruction of marketing theory.

The idea is not to banish marketing as a pseudo-science, which is un-critical, but to look at the ideological struggles which have emerged within the discipline. An alternate worldview must exists in the marketing space, one which contests the business and commercial orientation of marketing and brings in a socialist philosophy. The needs theories in marketing have been taken from psychology with contributions from Maslow and McClelland. While all psychological theorizing establishes needs as something which is

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[1] (ibid.)

natural, innate and present in all human beings, this paper argues that marketers can create and construct artificial needs among individuals to exploit them.

On the other hand, an attempt has also been made to look at the critical consumption theories and the paradigmatic changes which have taken place in the marketing thought. The standpoint of culture theorists have been included to garner a holistic view of marketing theory – where it stands? And where is it headed?

**Marketing: the Dominant Paradigm**

Although highly debated and disputed, marketing is commonly understood to be an interdisciplinary science and in cases an applied art which borrows its major theoretical premises from the field of neo-classical economics (Witkowski, 2005). Concepts of demand, supply, marginal utility, surplus etc cannot be excluded from marketing (Coolsen, 1978). Scholars propounded that this relationship to economics, gave marketing theory and practice, the ideological undercurrents of neo-liberalism, individualism and libertarianism (Witkowski, 2005). Marketing is primarily occupied with the mission of fulfilling and satisfying customer needs which would benefit business and be profitable to the organisation and its stakeholders.

Marketing as a term has pejorative connotations and there has been much deliberation about its nature and scope (Hunt, 1976) but theorists have tried to replace the traditional normative, profit oriented and micro-level focus. The 1960's experienced a dramatic change in marketing with the expansion of the marketing concept to include activities which were non-profit in nature (Kotler & Levy, 1969). Nevertheless, Marketing is till date commonly perceived as a mere manufacturer of needs and wants through sales and advertising. After the World War II, a paradigm shift (1955-1975) took place which "was influenced by military

advances in mathematical modelling, such as linear programming" (Wilkie & Moore, 2003). The next phase (1975 to 2000) called the Paradigm broadening phase "witnessed researchers from outside the field particularly psychology enter the marketing discipline" (Sheth, 1992). This movement resulted in a bifurcation of marketing into three schools of thought namely marketing management, exchange, and consumer behaviour. The broadening of the paradigm enlarged the scope of marketing attention from its "conventional focus on business activities to a broader perspective, embracing all forms of human activity related to any generic or social exchange" (Sheth, 1992).

Regardless of these developments, the positivistic paradigm continues to dominate the field of marketing with an etic view to social phenomena. The critical social science aspects of the discipline are conducted under the generic name of interpretive consumer culture research. So, parallel universes co-exist in the marketing domain with one being more dominant than the other.

**The Need for a Critical Perspective**

According to Tadajewski and Brownlie (2008) the idea of applying critical theory to marketing is not just to scrutinize and criticize the techniques, traditions and consequences of commercial marketing, but also to attempt to improve the way marketing actually works in contemporary society.

In a utopian sense, marketing should emerge through multiple perspectives brought in by marketers, managers, consumers, citizen and the various stakeholders but the capitalist orientation of marketing magnifies the dominant voices of producers and business owners. While marketers frequently talk about how the consumers are very demanding and require

businesses to constantly innovate, provide choices and the best price in the market but all this is done to compete with others in market setup. In that sense, the consumers are rendered passive and speechless. "Paul Lazarsfeld in 1941 contrasted between administrative and marketing research" (Tadejewski, 2010) and made a clarion call for marketing to be more critical. Critical theory in marketing has been majorly concerned with uncovering power relations in the market place, mainstreaming the marginalized and raising questions on the actors who wield an upper hand in the marketing process. The Frankfurt school scholars aimed at revealing repressive social conditions and authoritative equations to facilitate and uphold emancipation. To make marketing more critical in theory and practice, the discipline needed to face these critical questions head on.

Many marketing apologist were of the opinion "that marketing should be restricted to market transactions and should not cover socialist agendas" (Carman, 1973). They strongly held the view that market had its own ways of ensuring social good. According to them, the invisible hand would work to ensure that no unfair, unscrupulous transactions happened between the producers and consumers. Also, those producers who were deemed unfit to compete in the market place would be eliminated automatically. Based on this theoretical premise, it was suggested that businesses must compete with each other and leave the rest to the market or the 'invisible hand'[2]. A reference to the collapse of USSR has been constantly evoked to strengthen this argument. However this orientation towards business ignored the rampant exploitation of the workers at the hands of producers and bourgeois class. This realization brought to the forefront the evils of the capitalistic society and need for incorporating social welfare into the system.

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[2] A term coined by Adam Smith. He related this metaphor to the concept of market forces in 1776 in his book 'The Wealth of Nations'

Prior to the 1930's, businesses were viewed as an activity which lead to social progress and brought in high standards of living. But the Great depression saw a decline in industrial production, sales and profit for producers. Hunger, destitution and acute poverty were an inevitable outcome of the economic slowdown. This caused immense misery among the poor and it was during this time that businesses were accused of the problems that plagued the society.

**Critical Marketing Thought**

The foundation of critical marketing thought was laid down as early as the inception of the discipline by some of the great Greek philosophers like Plato and Aristotle who have discussed macro-marketing issues that were of concern to the society at large (Shaw, 1995). Micromarketing concerns, such as ethics in marketing (Jones & Shaw, 2002) also came up during the Middle Ages.

While postmodern scholars like Firat and Dholakia have strongly argued that marketing lacks a critical perspective, the field has not been completely devoid of it. 'Social marketing' ( Kotler & Levy, 1969) aims for  greater social good; 'Green Marketing' gives attention to  environmental aspects; 'Macro-marketing' lays emphasis on the political, socio-cultural and technological supra-structures and many others.  These digressions from the dominant view have been attributed to 'reconstructionists' like Dawson (1972) who argued for a 'Human concept'. The reconstructionists or the humanistic tradition in marketing fiercely fought against the view that individuals were mere tools for making profit. Nichols and Cullen (2006) believed that such a materialistic inhumane approach impacted the moral and social development of individuals especially children.

**The Areas of Critical Engagement**

Scholars have been concerned with the hegemonic effects of marketing (Tadajewski, 2006). The disciplinary space of marketing has mostly been shaped and structured by American ideas and this is clearly visible from the role played by the scholars, business schools, journals and associations from this part of the world[3].

America's inclination towards capitalism has transcended to marketing and the marks of the ideological struggles during the cold war and McCarthyism are clearly visible on the discipline (Tadajewski & Brownlie, 2008). Researchers have in the past taken a critical approach to this western bias in marketing thought and practice. Scholars like Firat and Dholakia cautioned that the traditional marketing management model had universalized North American values by being able to gain popularity in non-capitalist and collective societies. For this very reason, marketing has also been indicted of being an apparatus of cultural imperialism. A conspicuous example of this would be the American Marketing Association and its definition of marketing, which is universally accepted and rarely contested (Brei & Böhm, 2008).

The definitions of marketing given by AMA have been criticized not only for the American bias but also for how they conceptualize marketing. It was in 1935, that the association gave its first definition of marketing, which was changed in 1985 and then modified in the year 2004 (AMA, 1988). The definitions have been charged of reducing marketing to the level of a technique or tool aimed at solving problems and obsessing with positive outcomes (Fullerton, 1988).

The self-serving corporatism of the discipline has also been charged of neglecting ethical issues and environmental concerns (Crane, 2000).  In response to this criticism many

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[3] (ibid.)

business have come up with corporate social responsibility (CSR initiatives). Like ITC (Indian Tobacco Company) has its brand of 'Classmate' notebooks which help contribute to the education of underprivileged children apart from gaining huge profits from its tobacco business. Such CSR activities employ marketing tools and help create a positive image for the brand. Whether such initiatives are able to successfully integrate social issues is something which needs to be explored.

Many Scholars like Applbaum have been critical of these social orientations of marketing, according to them, subfields like social marketing offer only semantic differences. While marketing may scream out its pro-business stance from the roof tops, social marketing is subtle and discreet about the same and tends to hide behind jargons. Critics opine that social marketing, green marketing, CSR etc. have been unable to diffuse the power structures that exist between production and consumption (Applbaum, 2000).

The spirit of critique has not just limited itself to the managerial problem- solving orientation or the capitalist ideology in marketing but has also covered issues of axiological and methodological myopia. Marketing has been accused of being biased towards empirical positivist research and being over-reliant on numerical data produced from sophisticated statistical tools. The desire to make the discipline more 'science-like' and establish deductive nomological explanations for market phenomenon has been critiqued. Lowe (2005) has argued that "marketing needs to make a shift from the heavy, positivist, technical orientation and move towards a value reflexive dialectic orientation".  Theorists like Hunt (1976) have made great efforts to establish the scientific nature of marketing but to their dismay the discipline has achieved the reputation of being a 'formulaic management prescription'.

A striking contradiction that has engulfed marketing thought is that logical empiricism has continued to hold a prominent position regardless of the criticism it has

received from the proponents of interpretive and semiotic methods. Horkheimer, in reaction

to the empiricism school proposed a more holistic approach, a synthesis of theory and

practice, better known as Praxis. The axiology of marketing has not been bereft of critical

theory; the questions of marketplace distortion by large organization and the mirage of

consumer sovereignty have been raised by theorists time and again. "Heede claimed that

marketing works as a controlling science aiming at enforcing given power structures in a

society and serving the elite" (Tadajewski, 2006).

**Consumer Behaviour School and Consumption**

Marketing according to David Jobber (2001), "is still used as a synonym for

exploitation and a driving force towards materialism and excess consumption". It has assisted

the growth of 'consumer citizen', where rights of a citizen have been intricately linked with

the capacity and ability to consume. Firat (1987) gave enough evidence to support the

argument that indicated that "human beings were being forced into contemporary

consumption patterns" rather than being able to exercise their free will. The willingness and

ability to pay for a commodity decides the importance that an individual gains in a marketing

sphere. Based on this ideation of individuals, various terminologies like 'Loyal customers',

'High net worth individuals', 'Gold and platinum customers', 'Bottom of the pyramid'

etcetera  have developed.  Luxury brands etc. have known to increase conspicuous

consumption. "Consumption has become a means of distinguishing oneself from others in

terms of taste, prestige and consequently power" (Bourdieu, 1984). The concept of mimetic

rivalry also suggests that individuals consume to compete with others and also to imitate

those who are believed to be more powerful and successful. Marketers contribute to this

rivalry and derive maximum benefit from it. Proponents of Critical theory have been

occupied with the ideological, psychoanalytical and symbolic facets of consumption. Foucault (1977) has talked about how social reality is shaped by power. The power equation between the different actors in a market needs to be looked at through a critical lens. The concept of consumer citizenship suggests that consumers must use their consumption choices to express social agency. Consumer citizenship is gaining extreme importance with governments asking consumers to ask for their rights. The right to demand good quality, quantity and price for products and services is the power that consumers must exercise over corporate to qualify as good citizens.  The neo-liberal discourse of consumerism has notably defined people's identity as 'consumers'. This identity is constructed through ideas of agency and resistance. Foucauldian thought gives importance to this form of resistance as it is not an escape from the power exerted by producers and marketers but it is in itself an expression of power.

**Theorizing Consumer Needs**

Marketing authors like Kotler propound that marketing is "a process directed at satisfying needs and wants through an exchange process" (Kotler, 2000). It is a discipline which enjoys a unique and privileged status when compared to other management disciplines "only because of its supposed access to consumer needs and wants and socio-cultural trends in the marketplace"[4]. One prominent theory in marketing which deal with consumer needs is 'Hierarchy of needs by Maslow'.  Borrowed from developmental psychology, it looks at motivation from the paradigm of needs satisfaction.

Maslow identified the different types of needs and believed that they followed a hierarchical pattern. According to him, it was important for lower order needs to be satisfied

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[4] (ibid.)

for higher order needs to emerge. Through his pyramidal model he delineated the different needs as physiological, safety, social, esteem and lastly self actualization. While it may be argued that Maslow's contribution was originally to psychology and the aim was to understand the aspects of motivation, but it can be easily called a marketing theory because the discipline has adopted this theory, internalized it and imbibed it to its core. Need's hierarchy theory is one of the marketing theories which is included in the marketing courses of business schools world over. Moreover, this theory finds practical application when marketing messages are designed. When creating an advertisement, marketers take note of the need level of their target demography. Different products are presented in different ways to appeal to different needs (Frenz, 2009). Need theory is also used in designing the product mix and marketers often differentiate their offerings according to their customer needs. To take a simple example, Tata Nano is a basic model of a car which is designed to fulfil the need for transportation for a family on the other hand, a luxury brand like Audi caters to the esteem needs. An environmental friendly car like Reva would target the self-actualization needs. Markets use this theoretical model to build brands for individuals who are at 'different levels of needs'.

**A Critical Look at the Needs Theory**

Critical theorists like Marcuse suggest that consumer needs are induced and may not be as natural as they are theorized to be. Marketing system is believed to perpetuate and serve its own needs rather than those of the consumer. Marcuse believed that "in a capitalistic system people are not in control of their own lives" (Hartley, 2002). Freedom in Capitalist societies is an illusion, which is systematically created by marketers by providing consumers with a number of brands and labels to choose from. The irony being that similar goods and

services are marketed under different brand names.  This is believed to give consumers the delusion of free choice and which according to Adorno and Horkheimer leads to 'pseudo-individualism'. This belief that the brand has a personality similar to that of a human being is a marketer's construction. The brand is given life-like qualities like that of a name, image, personality, etc. so that consumers can relate and associate with it. Many a times one can hear sales people say, "This watch is very stylish and chic, wearing it will make you look the same". These notions of 'manufactured self-expression' are planted and not genuine. The abstract and intangible aspects of products like branding are turned into objective and real things by marketers. Marketers and advertisers manipulate and play mostly with the social and esteem needs of individuals.

Marketing scholarship has emphasised that consumers have latent needs which need to be converted into 'felt needs' by marketers and these include self-actualization needs. These marketing terminologies are based on the premise that 'needs' can be triggered off to push individuals into consuming products and services.

Maslow's theory approaches individual needs as innate and downgrades the issue of socio-cultural dimensions of human life. This 'naturalness' of needs as propounded by the theory becomes a justification for the individualism and selfish attitude reflected in how products and services are marketed and advertised. The theory is also over-simplistic and reductionist in nature. It reduces the status of an individual to a cluster of needs. The relationship between two individuals is diminished to a level of a transaction where one is in need and the other is the satisfier of those needs. This is similar to the idea of 'commodity fetishism' given by Marx where the social relations among people get objectified and the needs get monetized. In a capitalistic structure, the rich can afford to purchase more in an attempt to satisfy needs while the poor are rendered unsatisfied. In my opinion, the

individualistic approach of this theory, its apolitical approach, its failure to incorporate social interactions and the cultural context or the macro- societal perspective, is very problematic and makes it detached from reality.

Apart from this, the hierarchical nature of needs has also been severely critiqued and it was suggested that there is no evidence that needs have a hierarchical pattern (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976). It has been argued that "fundamental human needs are ontologically universal and invariant in nature" (Rice, 2010). Culture theorists like Hofstede (1984) have condemned the theory as being ethnocentric and having an American bias. According to them it fails to encompass the nature of collectivist societies. 'Self' has been the focus of attention and other aspects like family and loved ones are conspicuously absent from the theorizing.

**Marketing, Consumption & Need Satisfaction**

The relationship between marketing, consumption and need satisfaction has always been tricky and has raised eyebrows in the past. Needs are believed to be satisfied through consumption. Marketers assume that consumers are homogenous and can be grouped together on the basis of their similar needs. Sidney Levy (1959), among others, has fervently criticised this conceptualization of consumers and "extended the idea that consumers are heterogeneous in their needs and wants". Levy highlighted the "non-rational, symbolic and identity-forming aspects of consumption". The stalwarts of Frankfurt school especially Adorno and Horkheimer were concerned with how capitalism propagated false needs for products which have a symbolic value attached to it. According to them, the gratification of these false needs makes people happy and pacifies them towards the injustices meted out by the privileged in the society. They believed that the emergence of a 'collective unconscious' prevented the proletariat revolution as predicted by Marx.

The demand for useless products and services in modern society is also controlled by the use of mass media. Advertising and Public Relations have been used extensively by marketers to promote consumerism. Horkheimer and Adorno in the Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944) argued that the media willingly manipulates the passive and irrational public. Habermas, a pioneer from the Chicago school of thought, believed that the formation of a rational public depended upon the news and information available, together with the situations available for discussing the significance and the meaning of this information. Marketers have also been charged with providing biased information and deception through advertising (Messaris, 1997).

**The Active Consumer: Consumer Culture Theory**

The idea that the individuals are passive and can be injected with ideas and 'needs', has received a lot of criticism by scholars from outside the marketing tradition. Culture theorists like Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, David Morley etcetera have propounded that individuals are active in their interpretation. In line with this stream of thought, consumers must be looked as active members of the society as they constantly interpret marketing messages. Consumers constantly evaluate marketing claims and challenge the business enterprise when marketers are not able to live up to the proclaimed standards.

Methodological plurality came into marketing when a semiotic approach was applied to understand consumers and their reading (interpretation) of the marketing strategies employed by businesses. This approach gave importance to the analysis of signs and the different ways in which different consumers decoded the same encoded marketing messages. The semiotic tradition looked at consumers as individuals who understood themselves and their needs. Marketing messages and strategies when viewed as texts gave an entirely new

perspective to the study of consumers. Hall and others from the Birmingham school believed that texts were polysemic[5] with one preferred meaning (Hanes, 2000). The interpretation of text by its reader may not be the same as intended by the producer of the text i.e. what consumers understand is not necessarily what marketers want them to understand. According to Stuart Hall and other proponents of the active theory, the reading of the text depended on individual experiences and on frameworks like class, gender, ethnicity, cultural norms, traditions, beliefs etc (Hanes, 2000). David Morley did empirical studies to prove that the context of study was as significant as the object being viewed. This promoted a social theory of subjectivity and meaning construction.

The feminist perspectives to marketing take the active reader concept a step further. Feminist theories concentrate on subjective pleasures of individuals without homogenizing them (Brooks, 2007). If marketing were to embrace this concept to the fullest then it would have to mainstream the idea that consumers are not a monolithic structure but individuals with unique identities and private spaces (Brooks, 2007).

The mainstreaming of these traditions would help conceptualize consumers as individuals who vigorously rewrite and convert "symbolic meanings encoded in adverts, brands, retail settings etc to manifest their particular personal and social circumstances and further their identity and lifestyle goals" (Tadejewski, 2010). But there is a long way to go, the dominant marketing theory has till date failed to look at "product symbolism, ritual practices and the consumer stories" (Tadejewski, 2010) that structure product and brand meanings.Consumer Culture theory tries to fill in some of these gaps by taking a more critical stand. The macro and interpretive analysis of consumers was truly incorporated by the Critical Culture theory. (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).  CCT attempted to study consumer

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[5] The capacity for a sign ( a word, phrase, etc.) or signs to have multiple meanings

needs and behaviours from the standpoint of culture and society as opposed to psychology or economics[6]. Developments in the critical marketing thought made the consumer significant and brought their needs to the centre of managerial concerns. This theory has looked at consumption as a "historically shaped mode of socio-cultural practice that emerges within the structures and ideological imperatives of dynamic marketplaces" (Shaw & Jones, 2005). Reflective of a post-modernist society, it views cultural meanings as being numerous and fragmented rather than a homogenous construct[7]. There is no lack of critical perspective inside the marketing discipline but practitioners conveniently turn a blind eye to it which is why marketing has earned a bad name today.

**Concluding Thoughts**

"There are significant social scientific traditions within marketing studies giving the field a plural and intellectually liberal character" (Tadejewski, 2010). The consumer culture theory from the Consumer Behaviour School has been discussed to substantiate this claim. At the same time the narrow market focus and the exploitative nature of marketing has been exposed by looking at the theorizing of consumer needs.  This paper can be aptly summarized by looking at 5C's namely Capitalism, Competition, Choice, Consumption and Consumer Needs. Marketing has been charged to having a neo-liberal ideology which neglects issues of human development and welfare. MT is driven by a profit orientation with a clear aim of competing and driving out competitors. Darwinian law of 'survival of the fittest' holds good in the field of marketing. The aim of marketing theories is to drive consumption as consumption means sales and sales means profit. This paper has also explored the issue of 'pseudo-individualism' and the chimera of choice experienced by the consumer. In contrast to this Critical theory can be understood through 2C's of Collaboration and Communism.

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[6] (ibid.)

[7] (ibid.)

It would be naive and rather juvenile to believe that there can be a smooth meeting ground between marketing and critical theories or that one would embrace the philosophy of the other. There will always be some amount of friction and antagonism between the two. Their worldviews are completely different from each other and it is an arduous task for any theory to integrate elements of the other. At the same time, neither one can exist in isolation. Critical theories need to constantly critique the power structures established and reified by marketing theory and work towards dismantling them. MT on the other hand needs CT to prevent it from becoming oppressive. CT is also critical of itself and this is required from marketing as well for it to be an inclusive and a balanced discipline.

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