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Examining the Ethics of Marketing to Children From a Kantian Perspective

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Abstract

Marketers consider children's segment as lucrative, for children tend to buy products for their own consumption, influence their family purchases, and are potential future customers. Blinded in the greed for profits, marketers recklessly and relentlessly bombard the children with their communications and promotions. Critics find fault with such self-centered and callous behaviour of marketers in targeting children, terming their actions unethical. However, marketers think otherwise. In this study, the rigorous framework provided by the 18th-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, is used to assess the ethical nature of marketing to children. The key Kantian ideas of 'goodwill', 'duty', 'freedom' and 'categorical imperative' are discussed in the context of marketing to children. From a Kantian perspective, marketing to children falls way short of being ethical.

Keywords: Marketing to Children, Marketing Ethics, Kant, Goodwill, Duty, Freedom, Categorical Imperative

1. Introduction

In 1932, Edward Chace Tolman, an American psychologist, remarked, "Give me a child from any background and I'll turn him into anything you want—a scientist, politician, or even a criminal" (Tolman, 1932). Although Tolman restricted his experiments to rats and mazes, his findings are widely emulated by the corporations to convert children into profitable customers. The children's segment is considered lucrative by the marketers, for they consume a wide range of products and services, influence their parent's purchase decisions, and are also potential future customers (McNeal, 1992; Mediasmarts, 2015). In the United States alone, the children accounted for over one trillion dollars in their purchases and influenced another \$670 billion in parental purchases (Mayo & Nairn, 2009; Schor, 2004). Blinded in their pursuit of profits, the marketers are relentlessly and recklessly bombarding the children with their marketing promotions to gain their attention, persuade them to purchase their

products, and retain them for the rest of their lives (Calvert, 2008). In their greedy quest for profits, the marketers are aided by the permissive parents, ubiquitous media, intrusive technologies, and insensitive regulators. Marketers outsmart the children and parents by assessing specialized knowledge from the fields of anthropology, psychology, and sociology (Kunkel et al., 2004).

There is an intense and on-going debate on the ethics of marketing to children (DCSF, 2009). Critics argue that children are uniquely vulnerable, and lack the necessary cognitive and developmental abilities to understand the intent behind marketing promotions and are incapable of resisting the onslaught of marketers (Kunkel, 1988; Oates, Blades, & Gunter, 2002; Rozendaal, Buijzen, & Valkenburg, 2009). They condemn the actions of the marketers, terming them 'exploitative', 'unfair', 'deceptive', 'hostile', and 'toxic', with some even comparing marketers with 'child molesters' (Linn, 2004; Moore, 2004; Nader, 1999; Palmer, 2007; Schor, 2004). Marketers defend their actions, proclaiming that children, like adults, are autonomous individuals with definite and distinct needs/wants, and do possess the individual rights to fulfill these needs/wants (Cowell, 2001). Marketers even self-congratulate themselves for playing a key role in developing a child into a competent consumer (Cowell, 2001; Davidson, 1998; Kline, 2010). With both sides holding on to extreme positions, it becomes critical to assess the moral strengths of the positions held by those in favor and those against marketing to children. To assess the righteousness or depravity in the actions of marketers targeted at children, we use the rigorous framework proposed by the 18th-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, who is widely acknowledged for ground-breaking works, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*. *The Kantian theory sets high standards for proclaiming the actions to be ethical and therefore, is ideal for evaluating the ethics of marketing to children*. To begin with, we examine the essential concepts in Kantian philosophy, including 'goodwill', 'duty' and 'freedom' in the context of marketing activities targeted at children.

2. Application of Kantian Theory

2.1 Goodwill

For Kant, the only thing that is inherently good without requiring any qualification is a 'goodwill'. If one acts out of a 'goodwill', he/she lets the moral worthiness of action by itself to conclusively guide his/her behaviour (Rohlf, 2014). Are the marketers and advertisers guided by the 'goodwill' in targeting the children? Is there anything 'good' about their 'will'? Marketers are driven by their greed for profits and quest for achieving other self-fulfilling objectives, and there isn't anything remotely 'good' about them. Kant vehemently argues that the moral worthiness of an action does not depend on the consequences resulting from it, and rather is dependent on the intentions which drive the action (Sandel, 2009). Marketers defend their actions saying that they educate the customer through their promotions and lead them towards making the right purchases (Cowell, 2001). From a Kantian perspective, the defense of marketers is rooted in the consequences arising out of their actions and has nothing to do with their motives. For Kant, consequences can either be good or bad, but the morality of the actions can only be judged by motives. Are marketers driven by the altruistic motive to educate the customer? Or, do they consider educating the customer as a key component of creating an end product – the profitable customer? Marketers treat children as instruments of profit, which in itself is sufficient to question their motives.

2.2 Duty

For Kant, 'goodwill' is motivated by the thought of duty (Rohlf, 2014). If the actions are motivated by any other motive other than 'duty', however good or praiseworthy it may be, it cannot constitute 'goodwill' (Rohlf, 2014). If a marketer of soap communicates through their marketing communications that washing hands is essential to healthy living because it is their duty to do so, then their actions can be construed as ethical. However, if the same is intended at promoting the usage of soap by increasing the frequency of handwashing which in turn would increase the volumes and the associated profits, there is nothing ethical about such actions. Promoting frequent handwashing may result in favourable outcomes which makes it praiseworthy but not ethical as it is not motivated by the thought of duty. What is the duty of the marketer? It remains a strangely puzzling question when we examine it from the Kantian perspective of duty.

2.3 Freedom

Kant's idea of freedom is both compelling and demanding. For Kant, the idea of freedom is ingrained in the 'autonomy' of the individuals and goes beyond the mere expression of freedom of choice (Rohlf, 2014). To act 'autonomously' is to act according to the laws that are in some sense of one's own making (Rohlf, 2014). For Kant, just as with Rousseau, freedom does not mean existence devoid of any laws but living by the laws that an individual gives to himself (Rohlf, 2014). If someone is acting according to the dictates of the outside world, his/her actions are termed 'heteronomous' which is also considered opposite to 'autonomous'. The following example helps us understand the notion of freedom as expressed by Kant. Let us presume that an individual is thirsty and wants to drink something to quench his thirst. The individual is free to choose what he/she wishes to drink to quench his/her thirst. For Kant, when the individual picks up something to drink (whatever he/she wants to drink), he/she is not acting freely, rather, they are merely compelled by the irresistible need to quench the thirst. They are merely acting out of a biological condition. And, when individual actions are motivated by biological conditions, he/she is said to be acting according to the dictates of the outside world, and such actions are considered heteronomous. The notion of freedom does not rest in the actions that are heteronomous.

Critics of advertising refer to advertisers as 'the hidden persuaders' (Packard, 1957). Galbraith (Galbrith, 1958), in his influential work, *The Affluent Society*, argues that the primary function of marketers/advertisers is to create demand when none exists, discreetly shape them, and act as a catalyst, forcing (both push and pull include use of certain force) the customer towards the purchase. Marketers/advertisers survive and thrive based on their ability to create a desire, amplify the existing desire, and use of irresistible appeals to simulate an immediate response. Such actions involve intentionally manipulating the social conditions of the child to force or trick him/her towards a favorable response. By tampering with the conditions that are external to the child himself, the marketers are forcing or manipulating the child to act according to their dictates which is clearly heteronomous. Marketers argue that children are free to do what they want to do. Free action by itself is not sufficient to categorize an action as free. It should also include 'free will'. With marketers going all out fudging the external conditions of the child and nudging them towards making a purchase, they are interfering with a child's autonomy to decide for himself/herself and also making decisions on behalf of them. Marketers occupy the motivation territory of the child and force the child to act favorably. This takes away the concept of 'free will' from the equation. With 'freewill' literally non-existent, the children are no longer free to respond in their intended way to the actions of marketers directed at them. Marketers are also masters in inducing irresistible, non-autonomous desires, leaving the child clueless about the origin of the desire, and making it impossible for him/her to resist their actions (Crisp, 1987). This by itself amounts to infringement of the autonomy of the child to induce a market favored response from the child.

2.4 Categorical Imperative (CI)

Kantian framework demands acting out of moral law which is motivated by a sense of duty. This necessitates the understanding of moral laws. How do we judge the morality of an action? How do we judge what is right and what is wrong? Kant believed that human beings by the virtue of their rationality are guided by the supreme principle of morality – the categorical imperative. 'Categorical' means unconditional or without reference to any purpose or consequences, and 'Imperative' means something that must be done (a must-do). The categorical imperative (CI) denotes the unconditional requirements for the actions to be judged moral. CI does not consider the purpose or consequence of an action, and rather, focuses on the form and the principle from which it originates (Ellington, 1993). Let us apply the formulations of the categorical imperative to examine the morality of the marketers in targeting children.

2.4.1 Categorical Imperative –I – Universalize your actions

In the first formulation of the categorical imperative, Kant necessitates the universalization of action as a pre-condition to judge its morality. For Kant, morality is universal and impartial. According to him, "Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a Universal law" (Ellington, 1993). Let us apply the first formulation of CI to examine the morality of marketers/advertisers in targeting children. Marketing

communications alter the perception of reality and force the viewer to believe in the aspects which aren't necessarily true or real (Godin, 2009). It blurs the difference between what is considered as true, and what is believed to be true (self-fulfilling truth). Let us undertake a thought experiment wherein a medical practitioner likes to believe that his/her patient is suffering from a medical condition that isn't there for real and prescribes treatment for the same. The consequences of such a 'self-fulfilling truth' can be nothing less than devastating. If the practice of 'self-fulfilling truths' is not the right thing to do for the medical practitioners, then it is also not the right thing to do for the marketers. Subsequently, all the actions of marketers that alter the perception of reality and truth can be considered as immoral.

Advertisers use a generous dose of 'puffery' in their marketing communications. Puffery is an interestingly coined term referring to the tall claims and exaggerations used by the advertisers without stating any specific facts (Eg: the world's best chocolates). Under the guise of the free-market economy, hiding under the legal protection of caveat emptor (making buyers responsible), the marketers employ puffery in their communications targeted at children. For a child who cannot make a reasonable assessment of the claims made by the marketer, owing to his cognitive and developmental limitations, puffery becomes potentially dangerous (Andreasen, 1993). Let us consider a thought experiment which universalizes puffery. Imagine a medical practitioner using puffery to induce his/her patients to take a particular medicine or undergo a procedure without cautioning him about all the possible side-effects of the medicine or procedure. Puffery in this context could have a potentially catastrophic impact on the health and well-being of the patient. This shows the convenience in the thinking of marketers who defend the use of puffery in their marketing promotions.

Marketers regularly employ their creative faculties to skilfully deceive the children and induce them into a purchase. The concept of deception is much broader in scope than lying and includes misleading words and actions, intelligent omissions, and strategic silences (Alexander & Sherwin, 2003). With researchers stating that children do not understand the persuasive intent behind marketing communications, all the actions of the marketers directed at children are construed as inherently deceptive (FTC, 1981). Also, many countries in the world have some sort of statutory and non-statutory restrictions imposed to limit the marketing activities targeted at children (UNICEF, 2016). This implies that policymakers in those countries do sense the damage resulting from such a reckless pursuit of children by marketers. When something is not right for a few, it cannot be considered right for others.

2.4.2 Categorical Imperative –II – Treating people with dignity

Through the second formulation of CI, Kant stresses the uniqueness of the human race and its distinction from physical things. For Kant, humans by the virtue of their rationality have an absolute, intrinsic value, and deserve to be treated with dignity (Sandel, 2009). According to him, "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end" (Ellington, 1993). Marketers treat children as instruments of profit. This contradicts the second maxim which mandates the treatment of human beings as ends in themselves. Also, when children are treated as instruments of profit, it violates their dignity. Kant would never approve of the violation of the dignity of the other person.

Children are considered uniquely vulnerable and lack the necessary cognitive defenses, making them extremely susceptible to the actions of marketers (Kunkel et al., 2004). Kant would disapprove of the exploitation of vulnerabilities of the children by the marketers in their desperation for profits and consider such actions to be inhuman for they violate the dignity of the other person. For Kant, what is inhuman can never be moral. Marketers often objectify the characters featured in their marketing promotions. Kant would object to such objectification as the marketers treat those characters as mere objects and do not accord the dignity they deserve.

Marketers intend to attract the children's attention, convert them to a consumer, and hold them captive for the rest of their lives. This is reflected in marketing concepts like the lifetime value of the customer. This is akin to taking ownership of the children for the rest of their lives. Kant would find the idea of 'owning' the other person extremely repulsive and inhuman to its core. Marketers also use children to influence their parental purchases. This can be seen as treating children as a means to achieve their business objectives. Kant would disapprove of any action in which human beings are not treated as ends in themselves but are rather used as a means to achieve some other

objective. Marketers propagate the ideals of materialism in which the worth of a person is assessed from what he owns rather than valuing him for just being what he is. Marketers link extrinsic possessions to the intrinsic worth of a person. Kant values the intrinsic worth of humans which they derive from being the creatures of rationality and would object to attempts to replace intrinsic worth with external possessions. Marketers also promote products that are generally considered harmful to the health and well-being of the children. Previous studies have exposed the intentions of tobacco and alcohol marketers in targeting children and encouraging them to initiate the consumption of their products (Henriksen, Schleicher, Dauphinee, & Fortmann, 2012; Snyder, Milici, Slater, Sun, & Strizhakova, 2006). Food marketers constantly bombard children with promotions for products high in saturated fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS). The marketing of non-nutritious products is associated with a range of illnesses, including childhood obesity, diabetes, and hypertension (Hawkes, 2002; Kunkel et al., 2004). Kant would view the marketing of harmful products as a violation of human rights and would never endorse any action that violates the rights of the others.

3. Conclusion

Kant is highly demanding in judging the morality of any action. From a Kantian perspective, marketing to children is not driven by the 'will' to do good, and rather, it is driven by greed and hunger for profits. Further, marketing to children infringes on the personal autonomy of the children and is not motivated by the thought of duty. On the application of his first formulation of the categorical imperative, it is found that certain practices employed in the process of marketing to children cannot be universalized and hence, cannot be considered ethical. It is also found on the application of the second formulation of the categorical imperative that marketers do not treat children as ends in themselves, and rather, treat them as a means to achieve their objectives. For Kant, treating people with respect and dignity is a necessary condition for any action to be considered ethical. From a Kantian perspective, marketing to children falls way short of being ethical.

Note: The draft copy of the paper was presented in 3rd National Conference on Advances in Engineering, Management, and Sciences (NCAEMS-20), organized by Shanthiram Engineering College, Nandyal. The organizers have consented to the publication of the paper.

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