

## NEED, WANT AND ADVERTISING

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### ABSTRACT

The need-advertising relation has not stimulated as much philosophical dialogue as it has provoked ethical debate. This fact is especially intriguing as the cause of social criticism of advertising is philosophy (Kirkpatrick 1986). Whether they realize it or not, advertisers and critics have historically had minimal fruitful dialogue and agreement mainly because their philosophical standpoints are very different. Marketing scholars have the opportunity to elucidate the various philosophical issues related to the need-advertising relation and offer explanations on how to enhance advertising theories and practices.

The core philosophical question arising from need-advertising relation is whether advertising is capable of creating a need. On the one hand, marketing functionalists (e.g., Kirkpatrick 1986, O'shaughnessy & O'shaughnessy 2002, and Kerin et al. 2004) define the concept of a need as an internalized state in a human. They reject the possibility that advertising can create any need. On the other hand, other researchers (e.g., Roy 1980, and Rist 1980, McCracken 1986, and Buttle 1989) view a need as a requirement of a particular social life (Buttle 1989) and argue that advertising does in fact create needs.

The dialogue has had little theoretical progression. This is usually attributed to the notion of 'paradigm incommensurability' since the two sides of the dialogue often have different ontological beliefs: the former believes in realism (characteristic of functionalist perspective) and the latter advocates nominalism (characteristic of relativist perspective). Unlike Jackson & Carter (1991), who consider between-paradigm dialogues to be impossible and who equate the belief in commensurability with the support of imperialistic aspirations of the elite, the author emphasizes the necessity of continued interaction between various philosophical schools of thought within the field of marketing. The current research seeks to contribute to the fruitfulness of inter-paradigmatic dialogues in the field of marketing, especially advertising, by proposing a new direction for philosophical and ethical disputes of advertising.

A review of the contemporary as well as older definitions of need sheds light on an alternative answer to the question of need-advertising relation. This alternative revolves around the distinction that marketing thinkers make between the concepts of need and want. Philosophical dialogues on the need-advertising relation have missed this critical point and, hence, suffer from the error of misplaced emphasis. Summarizing the mentioned review, this paper attempts to demonstrate that many of the functionalistic definitions of want appear to be close to the relativistic definitions of need.

In summary, there is a clear distinction between marketing functionalists and relativists as to whether advertising can create needs. Pragmatists seem not to have a clear position on this issue. A review of the literature on the definitions of needs and wants suggests that the inter-paradigmatic dialogue should focus on wants rather than needs because what marketing relativists define as a need is cited by marketing functionalists as the definition of a want. In other words, the debate between functionalists and relativists on whether advertising can create needs stems from a semantic difference.

The contemporary theories of the characteristics, antecedents, and typologies of needs further support the claim that wants, rather than needs, are to be the focal point when analyzing the role of advertising. As such, need-advertising relation, as a topic for philosophical and ethical debate, is to be replaced with want-advertising relation. Perhaps, this shift of focus and subsequent studies of the role of advertising will lead to a more fruitful philosophical dialogue in the marketing field.

Marketers and advertisers in profit and non-profit institutions, the author suggests, should seek to align their agenda with the broad, long-term objectives of society. Whether marketing practices such as subliminal advertising, puffery, and emotional manipulation create wants that restrain society from achieving its ultimate objective is an important issue and deserves attention from the academe, industry, and government.

**References available upon request**