

Re-imagining marketing as societing

A critical appraisal of marketing in a developing country context

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Abstract

Purpose – Marketing theory and practice is under severe criticism – socialists and the practitioners criticize marketing in its current form which calls for active efforts by marketers to reposition the discipline – making it beneficial to the masses. The Western world is thoroughly investigated based on the opinions of public regarding marketing as a discipline. However, studies which present a non-Western consumer's attitudes toward the role of marketing in a society are scant. This purpose of this study is to encapsulate Pakistani consumers' understandings and attitudes toward marketing with an emphasis on their perceptions of the ethicality and transformative power of the discipline.

Design/methodology/approach – A purposive convenience sample of 40 professionals with diverse non-marketing backgrounds and of the widest possible demographic profile participated in in-depth, unstructured interviews. The content analysis and grounded theory method were used for the analysis.

Findings – Marketing is appreciated for creating product awareness and, occasionally, combating social problems, but this positive image is clouded by severely criticizing it for promoting materialism, being irritatingly pervasive and pushy, as well as for using unethical and unfair practices.

Practical implications – The study offers a valuable insight into the discipline's performative and social legitimization in a fast-growing Asian economy. The authors recommend paths for a positive repositioning of the discipline that will improve its public image and enhance its potential for being recognized as a force for positive social change.

Originality/value – Further to enhancing our understanding of consumer attitudes toward marketing, this paper's value lies in it being the first ever exploration of the developing country perspective. Most importantly, it contributes to a debate that could enlighten the much-needed repositioning of marketing as a discipline to make it useful for masses.

Keywords Pakistan, Interviews, Marketing, Grounded theory, Business ethics and sustainability, Public image, Transformative power

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Introduction

Traditionally, marketing was acknowledged as a business philosophy that advocated the critical importance of customers – a core element in all definitions of marketing (Levitt, 1960). Traditionalists, described marketing as “the whole business from the customer’s point of view” (Drucker Peter, 1954). However, with the developments in the marketing concepts, marketers started to realize the importance of other stakeholders – society in particular (Grönroos, 2006). The value of society as a key stakeholder is evident by the fact that service co-creation is impossible without the positive role played by social actors, ultimately creating value for the firm and society (Harris *et al.*, 2010).

Marketing as a discipline has benefited policymakers, marketing academics, society and consumers. However, the role of marketing has been criticized of spreading hedonic values among individuals and focusing merely on earning profit for the firm (Kachersky and Lerman, 2013), marketing to under-age audience (Yu, 2012; Calvert, 2008), causing a parent to child conflict and destructing social roles (Kashif *et al.*, 2014). The older consumers also seem to be affected by unethical marketing practices as researchers believe that some sales tactics are inappropriate and deceptive (Ramsey *et al.*, 2007). A few more believe that too much focus on being “customer-driven” can spread the feeling of disgust and inferiority among people working in certain organizational settings (Osborne and Ballantyne, 2012). To address these issues, a small number of studies have been attempted but these have investigated only the Western context, and this is insufficient to understand the situation in all its complexity (Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012).

A clear knowledge gap exists between customers’ expectations of marketing and the marketing concept itself, which has badly affected the growth and recognition of marketing as a discipline (Heath and Heath, 2008). Existing research shows that consumer attitudes toward marketing vary because of the differences in their behavior (i.e. based on demographic and psychographic factors) and ethical ideologies which can also play a role in shaping their attitude (Crellin, 1998); (Treise *et al.*, 1994). This is one important reason to state that people from developed to developing nations carry their own perceptions with regard to marketing. The anecdotal evidence demonstrates that consumers living in developing countries are less educated and are less informed about the consumption of goods and services. The developing countries can be a wonderful venue to extend the theoretical boundaries of marketing – a discipline rooted mainly in a Western paradigm (Polonsky, 2011).

The purpose of this paper is dual. First, it adds extra detail and refines what little we know from earlier studies of public opinion concerning the role and practice of marketing in society, thus heeding the calls by Heath and Chatzidakis (2012) and French and Lefebvre (2012). Then it expands the horizon of our understanding by providing insights drawn from a developing country context. In studying attitudes toward the transformative role of marketing, Polonsky (2011) identified differences between the Western and Asian context which he attributed to culture. As people belonging to different cultural contexts respond to marketing stimuli in a different fashion, thus calling for context-specific marketing studies (Mcley and Oglethorpe, 2013) it follows that the image of marketing as being beneficial to society would vary. We hereby propose that the views of citizens of developing countries will differ from those of societies where people are more aware of the discipline and marketing practices are mature and sophisticated but also publicly attacked by various pressure groups expressing the skepticisms of knowledgeable consumers. Another factor where we would expect to affect attitudes is that in the developed world, marketing has been particularly prominent in assisting governments and not-for-profits to combating endemic developing country problems such as poverty, health, education and social entrepreneurship

(Ingenbleek, 2014). The developing country perspective, so far, has been scarcely investigated (French and Lefebvre, 2012).

The social issues vary among societies which call for context-specific marketing studies (McLear and Oglethorpe, 2013) if marketing is envisioned to really solve the social problems. The marketers can play a positive role to combat problems prevailing in developing countries such as poverty, poor health conditions and challenges to new venture creation because of fragile environmental conditions (Ingenbleek, 2014). Pakistan, a fastest growing and 6th largest populated country in the world, is selected as a stepping stone to discover perceived role of marketing. Recently, as per reports of World Bank, in the year 2007, 17.2 per cent of the Pakistani population was categorized as poor and in 2012, had a life expectancy of 66.4 years. The inhabitants also face problems such as polluted water, limited health and education facilities, inequality in gender and security challenges. However, there is abundance of human and natural resources and enormous growth and trade potential. Recently, it is observed and empirically demonstrated that unfair marketing practices are increasing, and consumers have started to raise their voices against such practices (Khan *et al.*, 2013). In particular, researchers have highlighted issues such as obesity and bad eating habits of children, which parents attribute to TV advertising in Pakistan (Kashif *et al.*, 2014). This has been true in the case of other developing country markets where obesity and bad eating habits are attributed to materialistic marketing approaches (Popkin *et al.*, 2012; Witkowski, 2007). Furthermore, in recent past, Pakistan has faced earthquake of 2005, the outbreak of Dengue fever in 2010-2011, outflow of Poliovirus in the years 2013 and 2014 and recent flooding all over Pakistan. As an increased proportion of the world's population resides in developing countries, the study has value in determining the future of marketing by contributing to society. The results will help marketing researchers who are striving hard to advocate and promote a welfare marketing perspective that truly benefits society and acknowledges the importance of the happiness and economic welfare of humans (Varey, 2010). We envisage that the lessons on bridging the perception gaps between marketers and consumers that have been learnt in a fresh and still relatively simple context can inform practices in societies where marketing is mature and its image is suffering. Thus, we hope this study will benefit the overall marketing repositioning agenda which we believe to be an imperative not only for the sustainability and growth of marketing but also for the transition from the current "amoral consumerism" to the "axiological societal" (Panigyrakis and Zarkada, 2014) stage that will benefit societies on a global scale.

The study seeks to answer several questions such as:

- Q1. What do the consumers in a developing country context think about marketing?
- Q2. Are there gaps between what marketers and consumers from developing world think about marketing?
- Q3. What type of criticism is held in the developing world on the practice and thought of marketing?

The answers to all these questions are unknown so far and this is where current study contributes to the existing body of knowledge in marketing.

The rest of the paper provides a literature review, the methods used to collect data, key findings, discussion and conclusion.

Literature review

Marketing academics believe that marketing plays an important role in consumer welfare and social good, which is somewhat contrary to the core objective of any business in earning

a profit (Kotler, 2011). This view has been the product of recent movements such as welfare marketing (Varey, 2010), sustainability and social marketing (Collins *et al.*, 2010) and quality-of-life marketing (Panigyrakis and Zarkada, 2014), which is changing the way marketing is perceived. However, stakeholders still consider the material role of marketing when it has been used to establish brands with higher equity. Despite the widely held belief that marketing efforts result merely to earn profit for the firm, it is believed that marketing as a discipline can drive change in organizational as well as social systems (Kashif *et al.*, 2014). This can only be possible once a holistic picture of marketing as a discipline has been created, drawing on the experience of people with diverse cultural backgrounds living all across the globe and representing various contexts not previously represented. The opinions of people about the transformative role of marketing do not to date represent the developing country perspective (Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012), and this can damage the welfare marketing agenda.

Currently, most marketing definitions advocate identifying and serving customer needs, in order for firms to achieve profits in exchange. For instance, relevant scholars (Kotler *et al.*, 2008) explained marketing as “[...] the process by which companies create value for customers and build strong customer relationships in order to capture value from customers in return”. This definition has two major components indicating that the role of marketing in a firm is:

- (1) to create value for customers; and
- (2) to establish customer relationships based on the value provided by the firm.

According to this definition, society, its welfare and the role of marketing in benefiting people are scarcely considered. The recent marketing definition from the American Marketing Association (American Marketing Association Board of Directors) not only advocates the managerial role of marketing but also highlights its significance to society: “Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large” (American Marketing Association Board of Directors, 2007). Although society is mentioned in the definition, its role has not been much debated and needs additional attention.

Meanwhile, consumers criticize marketers for practices which reduce social well-being (Heath and Heath, 2008). The criticisms of marketing can be allocated into four categories: manipulation, promotion of materialism among people, provision of biased information regarding brands and advertising which negatively shapes the cultural values of a society (Wilkie and Moore, 1999, Tiggemann and McGill, 2004). In addition to that, TV advertising practices that promote unsafe physical acts among children have also been highlighted by consumers but, again, from a Western, developed country perspective (Yu, 2012; Calvert, 2008). Among all the criticism, *manipulation* is considered to be the most harmful and it has been prioritized for attention by marketers to achieve more of the welfare agenda (Peattie and Peattie, 2009). Manipulation covers several aspects of marketing activity, such as promotion of materialism amongst the members of a society, high consumption patterns (Lowe *et al.*, 2005) and environmental concerns pertaining to packaging and disposing of various products (Varey, 2010).

This is especially true nowadays, where marketing practice has changes significantly because of advent of social media and digital marketing efforts (Cornelis and Peter, 2017; Huang, 2001; Tiggemann and McGill, 2004). Digitally manipulated images of models can lead to a “socially constructed standard of beauty” (Reel, 2013) which can lead to excessive pressure on individuals to be perfect. Also exposure to unhealthy beauty ideals through

mass media and advertising can lead to negative body image and disordered eating among individuals (Levine and Murnen, 2009). Increasing levels of digital alterations can decrease the credibility of photographs (Greer and Gosen, 2002) even leading to banning of the advertisements (Poulter, 2011) because of excessive pressure from public. Thus, a high skepticism dominates consumers, with unpleasant consequences for marketing. For instance, it undermines consumers' believability and negatively influences on how people respond to messages from marketers. This skepticism is high when it comes to advertising and the motives behind marketers. A number of research studies have shown that cynicism toward motives of a firm can lead people to doubt the advertising message more (Singh *et al.*, 2009; Foreh and Grier, 2003; Mohr *et al.*, 1998).

Marketing can also trigger materialistic consumption among consumers which can lead to reduced social well-being (Shrum *et al.*, 2014). As stated by Boyle (2003), consumers are faced with meaningless market offers and overflow of fake because of the rise of commercialization. These offerings can lead consumers to adapt a materialistic life style. Further, materialism is criticized for physical health problems to depression and anxiety to dysfunctional consumer behavior (Shrum *et al.*, 2014) which can be dictated as negative aspects in marketing. This further contributes toward hyper consumption among affluent classes in developed nations and at the same time the poor in developing nations are suffering from under consumption (Gbadamosi, 2016).

Thus, it is evident that there is a widespread criticism among consumers toward alleging deceptive messages from marketers which lead into manipulating consumers. This cynicism about marketers has surpassed even into areas ranging from cause-related marketing (Anuar and Mohamad, 2012) to green marketing (Albayrak *et al.*, 2011) to skepticism and distrust toward marketing as a discipline (Sheth and Sisodia, 2015). This harms the plethora of benefits which can be achieved to benefit the majority, especially in the developing countries such as Pakistan. According to Woodall (2012), society at large believes that "marketer's propensity to act for the collective good" is minimum. Further, negative criticisms on a marketer including unethical marketing tactics and unethical corporate actions (Hollenbeck and Zinkhan, 2006) can drive negative consumer responses toward brands through anti-brand activism. These consumer resistances can include boycotting the product or services provider, culture jamming and on-line activism among many other customer actions (Romani *et al.*, 2015). In the face of these practices, consumers now prefer more realistic brand promises to advertisements by marketers. For example, a study carried out by Cornelis and Peter (2017) in the USA revealed that "Millennial consumers value advertisements that are authentic, containing realistic models, and meaningful messages".

Thus, marketers need to find ways to improve the credibility of marketing and in the face of welfare marketing this becomes a necessity. A recent attention has been extended toward authenticity in marketing. According to Lewis and Bridger (2011), the new consumers are in a "quest for authenticity" because they are more "individualistic, involved, independent and well-informed". The researchers Gilmore and Pine (2007) state that the shift to the experience economy is the main reason for people to see the world as real and fake. With the presence of meaningless market offers (Boyle, 2003), consumers are seeking for authenticity in brands and experiences (Beverland, 2005) which are genuine, real, and/or true (Beverland and Farrelly, 2009). As per Morhart *et al.* (2015), consumers are prone to rely on the "communication style of a brand" and highly skeptical consumers are likely to be "more suspicious about communication content" including brand values or promises. These findings are presenting a challenge for marketers to be more credible in terms of what they offer to consumers as brand promises in both developed and developing nation contexts.

Given the consumer criticism and doubts, insufficient efforts have been made by marketing people to position the discipline as benefiting the society as a whole (Varey, 2010). Marketers have, more or less, centered around communicating the fact that the core objective behind marketing activities is to deliver superior customer value, better than that provided by any competition (Kotler *et al.*, 2008). Marketers are of the view that unfair practices, as perceived by customers, are merely efforts to counter competition and are not intended to deceive customers (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006). However, research has shown that consumers do not always believe such explanations and think that marketers try to gain advantages from consumers, instead of solving their problems through offering superior products and services (Heath and Heath, 2008).

Table I outlines few studies which have been conducted to understand the consumers' views about the practice and thought of marketing.

Given consumer criticism and responses given by marketers, it can be argued that the views of consumers that they are part of society and of marketers that they represent organizational interests are contradictory. Both are trying to justify their own positions and the result can hinder the growth of marketing thought and practice. The strong criticism made by consumers and other social interest groups have strengthened the belief that marketing does not significantly contribute to social well-being (Varey, 2010). Generally, consumers associate the negative consequences of harmful product use to unfair marketing practices. In this regard, the exploration of consumer perspective on the *transformative* nature of marketing is vital for the growth and sustainability of marketing as a discipline.

There are a few studies where contemporary marketing researchers have tried to determine consumer opinions regarding the discipline of marketing. In a US-based study (Kachersky and Lerman, 2013), consumers interviewed considered marketing to be something which only addresses the interests of an organization, which are about generating profit. The respondents further believed that marketing practices are harmful for social welfare overall, as they promote materialism among the members of a society. In another study, conducted in UK (Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012), the researchers found that consumers perceive marketing to be highly manipulative, short-term in nature and benefiting firms rather than society. However, recent studies on developing an understanding of marketing thought among society have only presented one side of the picture, which is that of the developed countries of the West. The developing country context is absolutely missing from such studies. The efforts to establish a positive image of marketing among members of society cannot be successful without properly understanding the opinions of consumers living all across the globe. Hence, the study aims to bridge this gap by presenting a public image of marketing in a developing country – Pakistan.

Methodological considerations

Given the little that we know of what people actually think of marketing, which has been amply demonstrated above, we adopted a grounded theory method (Urquhart, 2013). This research has been conducted with the aim of identifying the opinions of the general public, people of a non-marketing background, regarding the discipline and practice of marketing without seeking to impose any preconceived ideas about the reflections of the subjects or the context and its effect on them. We chose GTM for its “undoubted strengths for coding and theory building” without much concern of its “inherent philosophical bias that may or may not be present in the method” (Urquhart, 2013). In view of the novelty of the topic, we opted for a purely qualitative approach to the design and conduct of this research in keeping with generally accepted practice (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008).

Authors	Context	Year	Methods	Sample	Findings
Heath and Heath	Portugal	2008	In-depth interviews	29 consumers, having a non-marketing background	Informs and educates the consumers; manipulative and misleading
Heath and Chatzidakis	UK	2012	Interviews	36 consumers, having non-marketing background	Manipulative, affects consumer sovereignty and does not contribute much to social welfare
Jay	USA	2012	Survey	318 mothers	Marketing practices affect child health and are harmful for society
Kachersky and Lerman	USA	2013	Experimental, sentence completion	625 and 160 respondents to respond to sentence completion and experiment	Marketing is good for businesses but bad for consumers
Kashif <i>et al.</i>	Pakistan	2014	In-depth interviews	32 respondents as fathers, having at least one school going child	Marketing practices create conflict among family members; advertising is informative but also promotes consumption of low quality products among under-age children

Table I.
Consumer views about marketing

In-depth semi-structured interviews were used for data collection to gain an individual and detailed feedback from the informants. Then three tier data coding was used (open, selective and theoretical) on the full interview transcripts. The procedures are hereby detailed.

Sampling issues

A purposive convenience sample was drawn from the third named researcher's private social networks and a snowball technique was used to expand the age groups and professions included in the study. Only people with a non-marketing educational and/or professional background were eligible to be sampled to ensure totally unbiased responses (free of any notion of what the correct response is) about the field and practice of marketing. The research team carefully screened out all those people that had any prior practical, professional or theoretical knowledge of marketing. During the pre-interview phone calls, it was firmly established that what the sample knew of marketing was limited to their experience as shoppers and advertisement watchers. The study design with respect to sampling strategy and technique is consistent with that of [Heath and Chatzidakis \(2012\)](#).

The saturated sampling technique was used to determine the number of respondents needed for the study objectives to be met while maintaining reliability and validity. The technique is borrowed from pure sciences but has been widely used by social science researchers. The interviewing-transcribing-coding-comparing-interviewing the next respondent cycle in this technique is constant and it stops when saturation, the point where the repetition of responses starts and no new codes emerge from the data, is reached. This process has been widely acknowledged as most appropriate in qualitative studies ([Patton, 2005](#)). Our sample saturated after 38 interviews. However, as advised ([Patton, 2005](#)), we conducted two more interviews after a few days and as the results were totally repetitive we stopped the interviews after a total of 40 respondents.

The respondents were aged between 17 and 80 years, and had diverse educational and professional backgrounds, they were:

- engineers (10 people);
- medical doctors (5);
- government employees (4); and
- academics specializing in non-business subjects from various universities in Lahore (15); and
- the rest were science and humanities students (6 people).

The gender distribution of the respondents (25 per cent females and 75 per cent males) highlights the fact that (with the exception of a slight skewness toward academics) the sample is taken as adequately representative of the Pakistani professional world.

Data collection procedures

The third author conducted interviews in the city of Lahore during the winter of 2013. A private setting was arranged to conduct interviews and respondents were compensated for their travel expenses. During the interviews snacks were also offered to the respondents. Each interview lasted between 30 and 90 min.

The respondents were briefed about the purpose and structure of the study, as well as methods for ensuring their anonymity and confidentiality of personal information. An interview protocol was developed in English ([Appendix 1](#)) based on [Heath and Chatzidakis](#)

(2012). The questions were asked in English but the respondents replied in Urdu. The questions were kept as open as possible and probing was used only to ask for examples.

To identify the gap between marketers' and consumers' perception of the role and function of marketing the interviewer, presented the participants, at the end of the interview, with two definitions and one statement which was related to unethical marketing (Appendix 1B). The AMA (American Marketing Association Board of Directors, 2007) definition was chosen to represent the managerial school of thought and the other definition was chosen to represent the Nordic School of Marketing Thought (Gummesson *et al.*, 2012). Hence, the field of marketing was comprehensively represented. The respondents were asked to choose the definition which best described their opinions about marketing and the unethical statement to judge their description. During the interviews, various charts were also used to introduce marketing definitions and an ethical statement. The statements were in English, clearly written on charts and also easily visible to respondents during the conduct of interviews. As a semi-structured interview approach was used, the answers of respondents took us to other relevant lines of questioning which provided the basis to ask a few more questions. For example, if a respondent explained that marketing is not the way it should be, the interviewer asked for details and clarifications such as "why do you think so?"

Data analysis procedures

We performed content analysis of the typed and translated transcripts as advocated in Kitterød (2001). The guidelines provided by Urquhart (2012) were followed to analyze the data. The cross-comparison method of analysis used during the data collection phase was also used in the final analysis stage. Views, feelings and experiences the respondents narrated were coded using intuitively developed first order (open) and second order (thematic) codes separately. The inter-coder reliability was checked in the complete transcripts of five interviews and manually re-calculated using a random sample of excerpts and found "substantial to almost perfect agreement" (Kappa coefficient of 0.75) even if the strictest of standards of inter observer agreement, those of medicine (Viera and Garrett, 2005) are applied. Theoretical (third order) coding was finalized when perfect consensus was reached. The following data analysis section is organized in theoretical and then thematic codes with first order, open codes provided in the text in italics.

Findings

Attitude toward marketing

The respondents were asked to share their opinions on marketing practices in Pakistan. The majority perceived marketing as a profit-making activity synonymous to brands, selling efforts and advertising. What they actually described is building *brand awareness* among potential consumers through the education of consumers.

I could never become aware of many products and services without the various marketing activities. I consider it a powerful tool to educate and inform the people about the new products and services in a society such as Pakistan (4: male, 29 years old).

Some respondents actually thought marketing is advertising and believed it to be an art of luring consumers into buying products for the sole purpose of benefiting the company. This view has also been identified in the work of Heath and Heath (2008).

Marketing is an art of convincing consumers to generate trial for various products and services that benefit the companies. Furthermore, it is an act of manipulating information that facilitates buying of unwanted products and services (3: female, 43 years old).

There is no autonomy in buying products. The marketers approach us everywhere: TV, newspapers, social media, and through sales people. Every time, they try to convince us into buying goods and services that are not much different, in terms of quality, from each other. (29: male 77 years of age).

With advertising having an important role to play in reinforcing the claims of authenticity (Beverland *et al.*, 2008), marketers should critically explore the consumers' beliefs. It will be fundamental in crafting a genuine brand belief among consumers in a nation like Pakistan where marketing as a discipline is still being developed.

The respondents also felt that focusing on increasing the sales of a company's products and services has been pivotal for the survival and growth of the organization. They see the practice as legitimate for large corporations since they invest in quality control and are accountable to stakeholders. On the other side, small, local organizations have limited vision and resources to stress and use quality control procedures that can assure production and manufacturing of high quality products. One respondent nicely presented the roles of the various stakeholders:

The government and social interest groups need to play a significant role in minimizing the manipulation of information by marketers (36: male 78 years of age).

The marketer–consumer perception gap

The two definitions of marketing (Exhibit A: Definition of Marketing by AMA and Exhibit B: Definition offered by Grönroos) were shared with the respondents to understand the gaps between marketers' and the general public's views on marketing. The respondents were asked to give their opinion as to which definition they liked most and which one represents the current practice and stature of marketing in Pakistan. The majority of respondents seemed to prefer the Nordic school definition although they do not believe any of them applies to what they have experienced of marketing.

Definition in Exhibit A values customers but ignores firm's motive behind all marketing activities: to earn profit. That is the most confusing part because marketing departments have to invest money and without a return, it is useless. (15: Male 63 years old).

This confusion may be explained by the fact that marketing in Pakistan, being in its early stages of development, has been equated to advertising and selling. Indeed, some respondents said that the definition offered by (Kotler, 2011) represents the state of marketing in Pakistan.

Criticisms of marketing practices

The informants believed that there are certain marketing practices in Pakistan that are *unfair* and *unethical*. This has been in line with previous research on unethical marketing practices in the developed world (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006):

Sometimes products and services are promoted as such super offers. The brand promotions highlight performance, benefits, celebrity endorsements, competitive pricing, and a life time experience. But most of the times, these claims are not truthful and conformance quality remains poor (2: female 45 years of age).

Misrepresentation. Terms such as *deceptive* and *exaggeration* alongside *selling low quality products* were commonly used by respondents when they were asked to reflect on the practices of marketing they had been exposed to. One respondent said:

I went to buy a new air conditioner from a large retail store. I was of the view to buy Brand X but the salesman in the store misguided me with his talkative style of communication and exaggerations about Brand Z which I ultimately bought. However, after a few months, the product stopped working so I took it back to the shop. I was again misguided about its repair and maintenance which I think is routine for marketers (24: Male 44 years of age).

This was also identified by [Heath and Heath \(2008\)](#) in their studies where the participants felt being deceived because of hidden or incomplete information.

High pressure sales tactics. A few people described sales people pressuring to the point of forcing them to buy specific products as a new phenomenon they had been increasingly observing. They saw selling practices as pretending to be building the relationship between buyer and seller, but really making sure that the outcome was purely to benefit the sales person. One customer aptly explained the situation:

Once I went to an apparel store and requested the sales staff to help me in locating brand X products on the shelves. The sales person who approached me was someone I already knew. After an informal chat of a few minutes, he started pushing the brand of his own choice, which I did not want to buy. Despite my denial, he insisted that I buy the brand of his choice. According to his opinion, he said, this was best they had. Even though I told him several times that I did not have a good experience of using the brand he was promoting he kept on insisting. At last, I bought the brand of his choice but my purchase was solely based on the forceful behaviour of that sales person (39: male 41 years old).

Marketing manipulation

Marketing manipulation has been discussed mainly as exaggerating information and making untruthful claims ([Osborne and Ballantyne, 2012](#)). In [Heath and Heath \(2008\)](#) consumers were found to think that manipulation dominates all types of marketing communications. In our study, we sought to further explore their conceptualizations and findings. The use of unfair means to convince consumers into buying various goods and services has been highlighted in previous studies ([Sheth and Sisodia, 2006](#)).

Respondents were asked to share their opinions regarding marketing manipulation specifically in Pakistan. They highlighted manipulation as a system made up of campaigning using surreal images, expert testimonials that result in people buying and consuming unwanted goods and services. They used expressions such as:

The marketers, through these campaigns compel (7: male 34 years of age) and make us anxious to try unwanted goods (13: female 32 years of age).

This reconfirms the studies of [Heath and Chatzidakis \(2012\)](#) where respondents agreed that manipulation occurs through “powerful persuasion, implicit persuasion, by creating unrealistic images, targeting to vulnerable people, aggressive sales, and making false claims”. The informants also highlighted violations of Pakistani consumer protection law, particularly when it comes to marketing food products. Food marketers have also been recently criticized for the same issues ([Yu, 2012](#)):

The advertisers are smart people. They develop creative ads, and mostly ignore the legal boundaries but due to lack of accountability, they hide and exaggerate information. (40: male 55 years of age).

Celebrity endorsement has been increasingly popular amongst advertisers branding activity over the years. Consumers, however, showed lack of trust toward celebrity endorsement products. The major issues are *credibility* and *relevance*.

I have seen some celebrities endorsing such products which they definitely do not use in real life. For example, an ex-cricketer, who is also a diabetic, appeared in a TV commercial drinking a carbonated drink. That is unbelievable! (11: Male 25 years of age).

What Pakistani people trust is their own private social networks rather than the people they see in the media.

I hardly trust advertisements and other promotional tactics. I trust a word-of-mouth from friends and family who are more credible than the celebrities (33: male 35 years of age).

The marketers were also blamed for targeting vulnerable age groups such as children and older people. The respondents believed that young children are susceptible to manipulative advertisements because of their innocence while older people are desperate to find a solution to their problems which makes them also malleable. The mechanisms used to convince older people and children into buying various products have been questioned already by marketing researchers (Ramsey *et al.*, 2007).

The marketers know exactly how to approach children and make them crazy about certain products. There are many food products that badly affect children's health. These manipulative practices are also found at the source of parent-child conflict (20: female 29 years of age).

The children are innocent so they get easily excited when exposed to various marketing stimuli and they also cannot judge the quality of products (37: male 48 years of age).

Countering manipulation: consumer empowering strategies

A new category, previously unrecorded by researchers, emerged from the data of this study. We coded under consumer power, the counterpoint of manipulation, all sentiments and narrations of consumers' assuming responsibility for their own choices and finding ways to counter manipulation. The debate on the extent to which free markets are synonymous with *caveat emptor* and the degree of responsibility for buying unwanted products that lies with the consumers is nothing but new. In this study, however, we have the first empirical evidence of how consumers themselves protect themselves from marketing's forceful omnipresence.

One of our respondents summed up both his dislike being manipulated whilst refraining from shirking his *personal responsibility* for allowing manipulative techniques to work. His solution is *self-control*.

Consumers experience products which do not deliver the expected quality and that adds to my frustration. It is obvious that it is easy for marketers to lead someone into buying their products. It is consumers, however, that need to exhibit self-control when they are exposed to certain brand communications (25: male 71 years of age).

This validated the findings of Heath and Heath (2008) where consumers are to be more responsible and vigilant in their buying decisions. However, to be more responsible, the consumer should be equipped with the necessary information. Misrepresentation and not being well-informed can hinder the process of being better judges when taking decisions.

It was mostly younger respondents that described specific strategies for countering manipulation such as *information seeking*, *planning* and *thinking* before buying or consuming certain products. They acknowledged that the small print and catchy sales pitch will always be part of marketing campaign. One respondent shared his views:

The marketers are creative people. Their job is to convince consumers into buying the products and services offered by their respective organizations. They are doing their jobs, hence, the

customers must also play their own role; verifying the information from multiple sources before trusting on it (1: male 28 years of age).

I rarely buy something that I am actually not planning to buy. I always have a self-managed evoked set in my mind that helps me in product and brand selection. The marketing has little to make me buy the product as the marketers just create product awareness in my mind. (6: male 24 years of age).

Marketing's transformative power

Almost 17 respondents believed that marketing as a discipline does not have much *transformative* potential, as it only serves the purpose of earning a profit for the firm. Some people had noticed positive contributions of marketers to attitude and behavior change that steers the public away from *harmful practices* and *unwholesome demand* and toward taking *safety precautions* (for example on how to avoid exposure to contagious diseases).

Many respondents held the view that marketing has strongly supported positive transformation especially for social services in Pakistan. For instance, social marketing campaigns against epidemics such as poliomyelitis and dengue fever that hit the city of Lahore recently were quite successful and their contribution to social welfare was remembered by our respondents. In addition to that, campaigns raising public awareness on issues such as mobile phone use during driving, HIV and adopting a healthier lifestyle were also acknowledged widely as significant social contributions of marketing activities. One of the respondents summarized it aptly:

The Punjab government wisely used several marketing channels to create awareness about Dengue fever which was well communicated. Keeping these practices in mind I think that marketing has the potential to transform consumer lives even in developing countries. (17: Male 29 years old).

Discussion

The respondents hold mixed views about the function, role and contribution of marketing to the lives of people. On the one hand, most of them see marketing as contributing to society through offering new products that make life easier and services that raise the standard of living. For Pakistan, a country with a significant percentage (17.2 in 2007/2009) of the population categorized as chronic and transient poor, a life expectancy of 66.4 in 2012, problems of access to basic services such as water, health and education, gender equality issues, persistence of conflict in the border areas and security challenges throughout the country but also an abundance of human and natural resources and enormous growth and trade potential (World Bank, 2014) the meaning of "new products and services" is very different from that of the countries that have so far been studied [e.g. Portugal, UK and the USA in (Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012; Heath and Heath, 2008; Kachersky and Lerman, 2013)]. From this perspective, we surmise that marketing is viewed as an activity contributing to societal development. Having said that, however, and consistently with findings in Western societies which are flooded with all sorts of luxuries and gadgets (Heath and Heath, 2008), Pakistani people criticized marketers for creating demand for unnecessary and even harmful products demands through exaggeration and misrepresentation using manipulation and high pressure sales tactics. On the other hand, our respondents see marketing as a mechanism to make a profit for businesses and as such a necessary evil that does more harm than good. Indeed, we have detected widespread mistrust and annoyance in marketing in the responses we collected. Despite the fact that marketing is relatively new in Pakistan –

even in Lahore which is a large and prosperous city as well as a major economic, political, transportation, entertainment, and educational hub – practices such as misrepresentation, high pressure sales tactics and manipulation have already managed to alienate consumers.

There is an unequivocal gap between how marketers define themselves and what Pakistanis of a non-marketing educational or professional background believe it is. It had to be noted here that our respondents were all well-educated people but they still hold a very narrow image of the field of marketing. Pakistani people do not distinguish between marketing as a system and two of its many functions: selling and advertising. Their view reflects an earlier stage in the development of marketing thought (the selling orientation) and the pervasiveness of commercial images. We cannot, however, attribute this finding to the newness of the discipline in Pakistan, as it is surprisingly consistent with those of the Western world (Heath and Chatzidakis, 2012). We hereby propose that it is a problem of the discipline and the way it markets itself.

Several criticisms were directed at marketers and their tactics. Exaggerating product specifications, pushy selling techniques, unfair pricing tactics, marketing of unhealthy food products, luring children into demanding products their parent disapprove of or targeting older consumers to sell them unnecessary services and the use of celebrity endorsement were considered irritating and also unethical. These criticisms that are extensively leveled at marketers in the industrialized capitalist world have been highlighted as a big hindrance in the growth of marketing as a discipline (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006; O'Shaughnessy and Jackson O'Shaughnessy, 2002; Osborne and Ballantyne, 2012; Yu, 2012). It appears that in Pakistan they also constitute a hindrance to marketing achieving social legitimacy.

The literature on consumers' perception of marketing, as a discipline, a business toolkit and as a transformative social force is scarce and focused purely on the rocking chairs of the Western, industrialized world. We do know that marketing has an enormous potential to contribute to societal development and welfare. Society, however, views the discipline's efforts to yield this power to achieve a positive outcome for people and the environment as fading way behind its goal as organizations' profit making. Developing a consumers' perspective of marketing as a positive *transformative* power, however, is vital for the growth and sustainability of marketing as a discipline.

It is not enough for marketing to define itself as a value delivering system focused on the consumers' individual and collective welfare capable of bringing on social transformation. Consumers need to have tangible and credible evidence that this really is the case and it is obvious that, so far, the discipline has failed to provide them in the West. Now it is also missing the opportunity to do it in the developing world. Pakistan was a *tabula rasa* on which marketing started writing its name when it already was in its maturity. Yet it appears that it has not managed to re-invent itself in accordance with its own self-definitions. Its practices and tactics have managed to build a negative, barely tolerable image.

In retrospect, it would also be beneficial to explore the role of marketer as an individual. Woodall (2012), presented an idea that to perform marketing in the rightful manner, marketers as personnel should be "psychologically and inherently oriented toward the spirit of the marketing". The people factor of practicing marketers can be vital in a developing country perspective to uplift the image of marketing to bring the above social transformation. In achieving this, marketing academics and practitioners should notice and address the various changes happening in the environment (Heath and Heath, 2008) also. The educational programs should "reinforce and/or modify preconceptions" about marketing and the marketers should be tested and encouraged (Woodall, 2012) in carrying out the correct role of marketing.

In a developing country, social marketing is also vital in irradiating the multiple criticisms and uplifting the consumers' perception of marketing as a discipline. However, to harvest the benefits of social marketing, practitioners are to focus on users or customers instead of what marketers produce (Lefebvre, 2012) and offer with a brand name. Also in doing so, Lefebvre (2012) suggests to convert the social marketing focus to "one of facilitating and supporting process of co-creation of value" where consumers are also going to value creators in the process.

It is safe to assume that small businesses and entrepreneurs will have a view of marketing similar to the general public studied here: selling and advertising. This is a reality which marketers in the field need to face. In countries such as Pakistan, where inflation rates are high and consumers are largely price-focused, organizations have always tried to approach people in an effort to sell products and services which people often cannot afford. The respondents of this study blame marketers because they levy high prices to cover the added costs they themselves generate. If we take celebrity endorsement, for example, people feel it burdens the cost of their purchases without adding any value to the product or its consumption.

Instead of promoting materialism (Wilkie and Moore, 1999; Lowe *et al.*, 2005), marketing could focus on safeguarding consumer sovereignty. A large majority of respondents stressed that it is the responsibility of consumers to play their role and become rational consumers, not being dictated by the marketing malpractice through advertisements and other related activities. These respondents highlighted the role of self-control in properly responding to marketing activities that result into buying unwanted goods and services. On the other side, almost an equal number of respondents blamed marketers in purchase of goods and services that are mostly of low quality and are not needed. They hold the opinion that marketers are armed with media, the celebrities and creative ideas such as green marketing initiatives and CSR initiatives that are mostly untruthful. Further to this, marketers deceive people into buying low quality and unwanted products by making "pseudo claims". These findings are in line with recent research studies that highlighted the same criticism (Sheth and Sisodia, 2006).

Breaking away from the skepticism will need authenticity from the perspective of marketers. The authentic motives and appeals can expedite the benefits of social marketing to cause related marketing in achieving social well-being in a developing nation. Disclosure of information will also be a part of this, where consumer will be empowered to take responsible decisions. Also, it is imperative that marketers establishing "acceptable boundaries" with ethical guidelines within which sales tactics may be developed for the sales organization when targeting to older people and children. Further, performance management systems should "recognize, value, and reward highly ethical approaches to selling" (Ramsey *et al.*, 2007).

The results of current study are different as compared with the findings of previously held studies. That is mainly due considering the fact that marketing in developing countries has not been matured much as a discipline and as a practice (Khan *et al.*, 2013). This also supports the notion that people living in different cultural contexts understand the theory and practice of marketing differently which demand for more context specific studies in marketing (Polonsky, 2011). From the results, it is very clear that marketers have to go a long way to promote a "social and respectable" image of the discipline in developed as well as developing nations. The opportunities to improve the image of marketing have been tied up with helping to combat social issues pertaining to health and education in developing world (Ingenbleek, 2014). It is also evident by the results that all the social evils are attributed to marketers. The results reveal that respondents view marketing as misleading, adding costs to commodities, using unfair means to convince children and older people, and adding frustration among the members of society. These results are in line with recent

studies conducted in the West to understand perception of public about marketing (Popkin *et al.*, 2012). Hence, the efforts to promote social image of marketing so far does not seem to achieve its objectives and need more concentration.

Limitations and future research

Despite several areas of contribution to knowledge, the results here should be seen in the light of a few limitations. The major strength of this study is the qualitative investigation where public opinions are detailed. Keeping in view the excellent details, future researchers are recommended to interview other samples – particularly managers with non-marketing backgrounds. This will contribute to reshape the discipline of marketing as being beneficial to major stakeholders. In addition to that, people from poorer backgrounds, we mean living in bottom of pyramid markets can also be framed to present their opinions about the field and practice of marketing. Another limitation of this study is the cross-sectional data which usually limits the analysis pertaining to a change in behavior. With the continuous efforts to reposition the marketing, it would be best to study a change in public perceptions – mainly to investigate the efforts of marketers to reshape the discipline.

Conclusion

The study has several implications for marketers and society. The calls made by contemporary marketing researchers to position marketing as benefiting the society must continue further, as several gaps exist between marketer interpretation of the field and public perception (Varey, 2010). The respondents of this study highlighted various areas of improvement that need careful attention by marketing community. These include offering lower quality of food products to children, unfair pricing, hard-sales tactics used to target older people, manipulation of brand communications and changing social consumption patterns through promoting material culture. These specific practices are hurting the marketization of marketing and are a hindrance to establish brand equity for marketing as a discipline. These activities should be discouraged and some real customer-centered policies must be established to grow the discipline of marketing. This can be achieved through promotion of certain roles such as marketers and consumers both. At firm level, an acknowledgement of producing and manufacturing quality products is pivotal that can really create and share value for the customers in return for their investment. Consumer education is important that will help them in selecting the right products and services which they actually need in a given period. Marketers can play a pivot role in here through reinforcing images of authenticity through marketing communication mediums including advertising (Beverland *et al.*, 2008).

On the other side, consumers need to be rational and must exhibit self-control so that only good quality products that are actually needed must be purchased. In societies such as Asian cultures where people live in joint family systems, an appreciation of parental guidance to children in buying various goods and services is needed.

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Appendix 1. Interview prompts

A. "The activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" ([American Marketing Association Board of Directors, 2007](#))

B. "Marketing is a customer focus that permeates organizational functions and processes and is geared towards making promises through value proposition, enabling the fulfillment of individual expectations created by such promises and fulfilling such expectations through support to customers value-generating processes, thereby supporting value creation in the firm's as well as its customers and other stakeholder processes" ([Grönroos, 2006](#)).

C. "[M]islead[ing], misinform[ing], or otherwise tak[ing] unfair advantage of customers, or knowingly engag[ing] in activities that have a harmful effect on society. In these cases, marketers seek to benefit at the expense of (sic) customers rather than with (sic) them." ([Sheth and Sisodia, 2006](#)).

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