

When Philosophers Disagree

A Philosophical Analysis of Marketing Advertising

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For years, scholars have been addressing the question “Is marketing, more specifically advertising, ethical?” Two of the most well-known arguments are proposed by Robert Arrington and Roger Crisp. Their debate is over whether advertising unfairly interferes with the autonomy of consumers. Arrington suggests that advertisers cannot remove a consumer’s basic free will. Crisp suggests that because consumers cannot know the effects of images on them advertisements have a harmful consequences on a consumer’s free will. There is still much debate over the topic of marketing ethics. A clear consensus has not been drawn nor has an answer has been revealed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will suggest that philosophy needs to approach marketing with a different spirit. As Slavoj Zizek writes, “The task is not to provide answers, but to show how we perceive a problem can be part of a problem, mystifying it instead of enabling us to solve it. There are not only wrong answers, but there are also wrong questions” (3). Philosophy should not be asking the question “is marketing ethical?” Further, it should not be concerned about the autonomy of the audience. Rather, we should work to uncover the actual role that marketers play in our society and contemplate the reasons why we need them to play this role. In The Plague of Fantasies, Zizek calls attention to fantasy and how it “mediates between the formal symbolic structure and the positivity of the objects we encounter in reality” (7). His point is that we create meaning in our world through complex symbolic structures. Because of challenges in our psychological development, these symbolic structures often fail to account for things in the world. Fantasy allows for the co-existence between the two. Because we need these fantasies to make this co-existence possible, we want marketers to provide material for these fantasies. This paper will suggest we should concentrate on understanding the way these fantasies are created rather than investigating consumer autonomy.

DISCUSSION

Zizek is a Slovenian philosopher who relies heavily on the psychoanalysis of French philosopher Jacques Lacan. This is important because whereas Crisp and Arrington seem to rely on Freud and a psychoanalytic approach, Zizek dismisses this. Because Crisp and Arrington are rooted in Freud and the notion of the unconscious mind, they are worried about the unfair manipulation of the subconscious.

Zizek, following Lacan, argues there is no such thing as the unconscious mind, but that an individual creates a symbolic order to symbolize and represent themselves and the relation to the world.

This difference is important for this reason. Arrington and Crisp both assume, as many people do, that a consumer buys a product or service in hope that they will be able to attain their fantasy. So they question whether the fulfilled desire is conscious or subconscious. In contrast, Zizek suggests from a psychoanalytic perspective that a consumer makes this purchase knowing that it can never fully satisfy their fantasy. This radically changes the role of advertising in our psychological make-up. The purpose of buying a product is not because it fulfills the fantasy but because it keeps the fantasy at arm's length. As a result, consumers define themselves as that person who is not the person in the commercial, rather the person striving to be the person featured in the commercial.

To explain this it is important to explain the distinction Zizek makes between The Real and the symbolic. The Real does not represent reality. Rather it is the most basic level of consciousness. It occurs before the development of clear thought. The symbolic develops as consciousness wants to comport itself to others around it. However, there is a gap between the basic understanding of The Real and the demands of the symbolic. Fantasy, in Zizekian terms, is more than a word which represents desire. Fantasy is the framework that orders desires and conceals the fact that these desires are unattainable. The effect this has is to ease the tension between The Real and the symbolic by presenting a fantasy that The Real knows it can never attain.

So, marketing techniques aid this process by presenting images that consummate the fantasy, but in a way that can never actually fulfill the fantasy. Marketing bridges the gap between the Real and the symbolic because the act of marketing facilitates the very process of symbolization. In other words, marketing techniques supports a consumer's ability to symbolize themselves. Take this as a basic example: advertisements for cleaning products almost always feature a beautiful home. The fantasy in this scenario is that the stain depicted in the kitchen or bathroom exists in the context of a home that is so clean no one could possibly live in it. Now scholars such as Crisp and Arrington ask whether the image of that perfect home, on a conscious or unconscious level, makes a consumer really think "if I buy this product, my home will be that clean." Zizek's point is it obviously does not; no one is that naïve. But then what does the commercial do?

The commercial presents a kitchen so spotless it can never be attained. So on the level of the symbolic, the consumer sees the ideal home that may never be attained. But because of this, on the level of the basic psyche of The Real, the consumer can think that since that kitchen is impossible, he or she does not really have to worry about achieving it. This leaves the consumer to portray him or herself as incompetent at maintaining a house but at the same time in a position not to worry about it. Consequently, the advertisement fills the void between The Real and the symbolic leaving the consumer satisfied with their purchase without having had to address their unattainable and possibly irrational fantasy.

As can be seen, Crisp and Arrington's question: does marketing force false opinions on to the conscious or unconscious self, becomes irrelevant in Zizekian terms. Zizek argues that there is no self or unconscious mind, but symbolic order. So the question of subconscious manipulation becomes irrelevant. Instead, there is a symbolic order that is constructed by the individual. The symbolic order disguises the fact that there is no self, it regulates life as we know it, and allows a person to symbolize and represent themselves. The symbolic order only works as long as there is a distance and this distance is constituted by the gap between The Real and the symbolic.

As Zizek clarifies, this intrinsic gap is a result of what Zizek identifies as the decentered self: "*the division between something and nothing*, between the feature of identification and the void" (181). Because our self is decentered, we have a lack of meaning that becomes the motivation for symbolization. Since there are gaps in us between The Real and the symbolic, we symbolize symptoms in relation to those gaps. Zizek refers to Lacan when he explains the symptom when he states, "We can even say that 'symptom' is Lacan's final answer to the eternal philosophical question 'Why is there something instead of nothing?' – this 'something' which 'is' instead of nothing is indeed the symptom" (77). Symptoms will always exist because we are decentered beings. They also persist because our activity of symbolization struggles to symbolize what psychic contents there are to symbolize. Zizek proposes the question: "How can infinite desire focus on a finite object?" (104), the answer being that it cannot. Since

infinite desires can never be fulfilled, a person creates a fantasy to fill the void. But the fantasy is supposed to cover up the void, not try to solve it since that would be impossible.

Returning to advertising, it is important to realize that the gaps in our psyche are created intrinsically. They will be there regardless of advertising. Further, the need for fantasy is intrinsic to the human condition. Advertising campaigns help consummate fantasy. However, they do this not by bridging the gaps every person has. Rather they fill consumers' desires by not bringing The Real and the symbolic together. This is made clear in the example regarding the cleaning products and the kitchen. The consumer does not buy the cleaning product to fulfill the fantasy of an immaculate kitchen because they are a decentered object who needs this symptom, along with other symptoms, to give their life purpose. Consumers want advertising and products to reinforce their gaps, not to close them.

This point is reinforced by recognizing the importance of the Other for Zizek. The Other represents an ideal that we live through since we know we can never bring The Real and the symbolic together. When the population intrinsically desires this ideal and possibly unattainable state, they reject The Real in favor of the symbolic world behind it. Symbolic order structures our perception of reality and the big Other sustains symbolic order for American citizens. The big Other allows us to externalize their intimate feelings and beliefs through the Other. Zizek refers to the Other in his famous example regarding laughing tracks on television shows. The laughing track exists so that the television can laugh for the consumer. A person can merely sit and watch on sitcom on TV while the Other is laughing and enjoying the show for them. Then, the consumer can go to bed feeling a sense of satisfaction. Consumers do not feel satisfied because they enjoyed the sitcom themselves, they are satisfied because the Other enjoyed it for them through the laughing track. It is as if we allow the Other to hold the symbolization since we cannot incorporate the symbol into our own psychic scheme.

Advertisements play a similar role. Marketing campaigns do influence consumers' buying behavior, but not in the way most believe. People rely and trust the Other when making a purchase. When we see an image of a person on a box or in an advertisement smiling, the Other is filling the void between the Real and the fantasy. Because we can see that this person enjoys and trusts this particular product by means of the expression on their face, a consumer will automatically trust in it too. Consumers are more comfortable relying, believing, and enjoying through the Other. So we do not need to close the gap within ourselves. In other words, on a psychological level, we do not care if we enjoy the product because we can see someone else enjoying it for us. As we proceed through life, our fantasies change and develop as the areas we cannot symbolize change. But since fantasy can never go away, we never want to fulfill our deep fantasies, and we want the Other to fulfill it for us.

The gap and decentered self gives fantasy its purpose. Fantasy conceals the inconsistency of symbolic structure; it bridges the gap between the symbolic and The Real. It is the effects of people's fantasies that forces marketers to promote the products and services that allow consumers to function as they choose in today's world. As Zizek words it, "Fantasy provides rationale for the inherent deadlock of desire" (43). Marketers need to adhere to people's fantasies in order to sustain the gap between the symbolic and The Real and consumers want them to do just that.

One may argue that a person does not create their own fantasy. Further, a critic may argue that advertising sparks the creation of these ideal symbolic states. Zizek suggests an opposing view in The Sublime Object of Ideology when he writes, "we find reasons attesting our belief because we already believe; we do not believe because we have found sufficient good reasons to believe" (35). People naturally have faith in and desire products and services that will sustain their gaps by not accomplishing what we need them to accomplish in order to fulfill the fantasy. The belief already exists through the Other; however, people recognize that their beliefs and desires may be irrational. The justification occurs after the belief is formed so that people do not have to come to terms with their irrationality.

Marketing receives a bad reputation due to the lack of understanding of the above notions. Ryan Holiday, journalist for FORBES magazine writes, "The secret to marketing is one thing and one thing only: exploit the difference between perception and reality. We find gaps in the system and wedge our products and stories there." While some criticize the methodology of advertising, they fail to recognize the psychological necessity of this marketing technique. Advertisements fill the void and facilitate the justification that needs to occur in order to sustain the gap. People want to believe that a product is going

to provide subjective effects which play into their fantasy. Therefore, a consumer will naturally accept a billboard, commercial, or advertisement because it provides the justification they need; the product and advertisement maintain the fantasy.

Arrington's view depends upon appealing to an unconscious desire that can be fulfilled. Zizek refers to symbolic order and how people represent themselves in terms of their gaps and fantasies. In contrast to Arrington's view, these fantasies are not fulfilled. The void remains but marketing techniques bridge the gap between The Real and symbolic ultimately providing ways for a consumer to symbolize themselves.

Robert Arrington's well known article, "Advertising and Behavior Control" calls attention to the fact that consumers "often wish to purchase subjective effects" (469). This is very true. For example, a woman purchases make up for the subjective effects of looking younger, feeling more beautiful, and so on. It is the subjective effects associated with products which support consumer's fantasy. The woman, being a rational being, knows that she will never reach the ideal state she has created in her fantasy. Yet, it is marketers' job to draw connections between mundane products and services with these ideal states to provide for their consumer's fantasy and sustain their gap. Our culture or context also facilitates people's gaps and symptoms through the Other and symbolic order. Our context (a capitalistic society), consumer's fantasies, and marketer's obligations form a system where each part plays a significant role. Because everything is interconnected, marketers must ask themselves a few questions: Whose fantasies are you supporting? And, what are the effects of supporting those fantasies?

It may be beneficial to elaborate and focus on the radical and fantastical aspects in media, advertisements and other marketing techniques. By placing an emphasis on extreme and unattainable elements in advertisements, marketers will still be able to appeal to their consumer's fantasy, but in a way that will never be considered manipulative or deceitful. This method would make it absolutely clear that the advertisement does not reflect reality. In addition, it will leave the advertisement open for the consumer's interpretation. These consumers will find their own way to interpret and symbolize themselves how they choose based on the ad they viewed.

There is no universal formula for fantasy. Therefore, it is impossible to identify a clear target market and then only appeal to the target market's fantasies. Consequently, by having an advertisement that is more farfetched, a marketer will appeal to a larger consumer base or a wider range of fantasies.

Ultimately, fantasy eliminates the need to question whether or not marketing is ethical. Marketers play a significant role in the world today and must not abuse the opportunities they have in their position. Marketers must never lie, cheat, steal, and so on. Of course these are commonly accepted ethical principles in today's world. Given the fact that marketers are needed to play an influential role in our capitalistic society, they must be cognizant of the actions they take while supporting people's fantasies.

CONCLUSION

While the question "are marketing techniques, such as advertising, ethical?" remains, our intention was not to provide an answer. We would like to refer back to the quote in the introduction to restate that "The task is not to provide answers, but to show how we perceive a problem can be part of a problem, mystifying it instead of enabling us to solve it. There are not only wrong answers, but there are also wrong questions". Given Zizek's insight, it is clear that consumers need and want marketers to play the role they do in society.

CITATIONS

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