Chapter 1
The Concept of “Consumerism” from a Consumer Activist Perspective

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ABSTRACT

The chapter defines the concept of ‘consumerism’ and discusses its different perspectives which emerged during its historical development. The author adopts the second perspective of consumerism which posits that consumerism is a movement aimed at safeguarding the interests and rights of consumers. This view is closely related to the concept of social responsibility (CSR) and subsequently societal marketing. There is evidence in the literature to suggest that in an era of increasing social problems and environmental challenges, there is a need for CSR and sustainable marketing. In fact, the second definition of consumerism is inextricably linked with CSR and societal marketing. The chapter is conceptual in nature and provides a review of some of the latest trends in the field such as boycotting, sustainable consumption, internet activism, anti-branding, Fair trade, green consumerism, and sustainable marketing. The discussion is concluded by providing some suggestions to practitioners and directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of consumerism has been explored by several academics (Bloom and Greyser, 1981; Bloom and Smith, 1986; Greyser and Diamond, 1974; Greyser, 1977). The term consumerism is linked to the behavior of organizations and the expectations of the society. Corporations should identify and define their purpose and objectives in a way that align with the expectations of society. If customers lack trust in businesses because they are not meeting the customers’ and society’s expectations then they may be perceived as unnecessary, they may be heavily criticized, accused and boycotted. In the 21st century consumers have become more caring and socially aware, moving towards a more responsible and responsive attitude to issues which may not directly concern them such as Third World exploitation. The mass media and social media highlight that there is increased consumer and public concern about health

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issues, animal welfare, environmental protection, child labour and ethical trading. The current trend in Europe, largely due to the current economic crisis and the masses of refugees moving from the Middle East into EU countries, is for consumers to engage in more socially responsible behavior, move away from leading a life of excessive consumption and materialism, towards more enduring values such as respect, compassion, and empathy. Similarly, there is evidence in the press and literature suggesting that the business sector has become more responsive to social and environmental problems and engage more in societal and sustainable marketing. Consumerism has the potential to play a constructive role in building a sustainable business environment by emphasizing for example consumer awareness, fair trading, codes of conduct and ethical business practices. It motivates managers to adopt a new way of thinking beyond the narrow boundaries of generating short-term sales and profits, and more towards adopting a sustainable approach aimed at safeguarding the quality of life of future generations.

EVOLUTION AND FUNDAMENTAL DEFINITIONS OF CONSUMERISM

When the term “Consumerism” first made its appearance in the academic literature it was coined with the over-consumption of goods and services. Veblen (1899) studied the newly emergent middle class at the turn of the twentieth century and wrote a detailed social critique of conspicuous consumption. According to Veblen (1899) the upper social class at the time engaged in practices of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. However, the term has acquired several meanings over time based on different perspectives. The first perspective of consumerism views the term as:

1. The manipulative business activities to entice consumers to buy products,
2. The second perspective holds the idea that consumerism is the movement that aims as ascertaining consumers’ rights, and
3. The third perspective refers to consumption as a way of life or ideology (Yani-de-Soriano and Slater, 2009).

The First Definition: The “Manipulative Perspective”

Vance Packard (1957) stated that consumerism is related to strategies and techniques that aim at encouraging consumers to consume more hence, expanding their needs and desires. According to this view, consumerism is associated with the overuse of promotion, aggressive selling and advertising. Packard (1957) expressed his concern in relation to the overuse of advertising highlighting the risk of manipulating customers into over-consuming. The evolution of the marketing management orientation was characterized by a phase of aggressive selling whereby marketers were mostly concerned with stock levels and as a result businesses focused their efforts on aggressive and promotion. This philosophy, which was identified by Kotler et al. (2008), has been known as the selling orientation. This orientation nourished the “manipulative perspective” whereby businesses focused on aggressive selling rather than customer focus which was at the heart of the marketing orientation and stipulated intense criticism for exploitative and manipulative behavior on the part of businesses.
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