Does Marketing Create Needs? A Question with a Simple but Unsatisfactory Answer

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Abstract Does marketing create needs? This is an intriguing question that arises from time to time when conflicting views emerge. Critics of marketing, and even many consumers, believe that marketing can and does create needs. Consequently, a belief is formed that marketers through cunning marketing activities influence consumers and make them buy things that they really do not want or need. This belief raises many questions directly related to the ethics of marketing. But, is it really true that marketing does not create needs but only influences wants, as prominent marketing scholars advocate? The aim of this paper is to incite a logical reflection and discussion about the phenomenon of need and give an answer to the controversial question: "does marketing create needs?"

Keywords: marketing, needs, needs definitions, needs creation, wants

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1 Introduction

There is a debate on whether marketers create needs and make people buy products they do not want. Kotler & Keller (2006) hold the view that 'marketers do not create needs: needs preexist marketers. Marketers, along with other societal factors, influence wants' (p. 24). Subsequently, they expand on this statement saying that 'marketers might promote the idea that a Mercedes would satisfy a person's need for social status. They do not, however, create the need for social status' (p. 24). In this context 'social status' falls into the category of 'basic human requirements or needs' that cannot be created. Kotler also expanded on these human needs stating that they 'are not created by their [people's] society or by marketers; they exist in the very texture of human biology and the human condition' (Kotler, 1984, p. 5, cited in Buttle, 1989, p. 204). Firat (1985) states that the Consumer Behavior research and literature assume that certain variables, like 'needs', that influence buying decisions and behaviors are given. This standpoint dominates in social sciences from which stems the premise that needs are creations of innate processes within man. Holding the same conceptual position, Ogunlade (2013), in response to critics that argue that promotion has potential to create consumer needs, states that 'advertising is a relatively weak persuasive tool' proven by the fact that 'the failure rate for new products is very high' (p. 10).

On the other hand, there are differing opinions from the mainstream economic thought. Proponents of Critical Theory, in context of mass consumption, view needs not as embedded in human nature but as shaped by powerful forces (e.g. advertising), that are 'formed in ways that tie people emotionally, as consumers, to the possession of more and more goods, and thereby increase their material and psychological dependence upon the goods society' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012, p. 66). When analyzing web and database searches, Phelan (2005) states that there little or no reference can be found about the terms 'creating customer needs', which indicates a lack of discussion about this alternative view. The idea that marketers create needs can be supported by the fact that companies use celebrities 'to endorse a product that is unrelated to the celebrity's expertise or ability' (p. 3) which means that 'consumers buy because of an aspirational identification with the celebrity rather than an explicit (or even latent) need for the product' (p. 3). The idea that needs can be created is also proposed by Hatakeyama (2012), stating that revolutionary innovation, which is based on the use of revolutionary technology, can create new

needs. Hatakeyama defines revolutionary innovation as 'satisfying customer needs which the customer has not identified' (p. 246). Sundar & Limperos (2013) suggest that new media technology can shape and create new user needs contrary to the view of the Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory that assumes 'people have innate needs that can be satisfied by media' (p. 506). From the consumer perspective, Heath & Heath (2008), investigating the consumers' perception on marketing, showed that from a poll of interviewed participants all stated that marketing does create needs, while some argued that it also awakens latent needs or wants.

Because this dilemma did not generate a satisfactory answer, the mainstream economic theory assumes that human needs are already present as an innate given factor, therefore needs are not treated, but the focus of the economic activity is the satisfaction of wants (Heller, 1976). Mainstream economists 'argue that needs can be expressed and/or latent and conclude that marketing does not create or invent needs but merely allows them to surface' (Marion, 2006, p. 253). Latent needs are not constructed but given, defined as unexpressed, and remain latent until activated by marketers (Marion, 2006). Therefore, 'clever marketing scholars solved this issue by introducing the term "want", stating that marketers do not create needs but influence the wants of consumers' (Marion, 2005, p. 10).

The question still persists: can needs be created? In the following section a definition analysis will be provided for both 'needs' and 'wants' for the sole purpose of answering this question.

2 Literature review

2.1 Definitions of 'need'

In this analysis multiple definitions of 'need' will be presented that will broaden the perspective on how 'needs' are understood, but also that will help in reaching logical conclusions about the problem stated in the introduction. It is, however, important to note that in the past attempts to give a clear definition of the term 'need' were unsuccessful. Therefore, multiple different definitions of need are still being used because a consensus has not been reached about its meaning (Watkins & Kavale, 2014; Stufflebeam et al, 1985).

Table 1: Definitions of 'need'

	Definition	Source
1	Need is 'something that you must have in order to live a satisfactory life or to achieve a particular thing:'	(Cambridge Business English Dictionary, n.d.)
2	Need is 'a construct (a convenient fiction or hypothetical concept) which stands for a force (the physico-chemical nature of which is unknown) in the brain region, a force which organizes perception, apperception, intellection, conation and action in such a way as to transform in a certain direction an existing, unsatisfying situation.'	(Murray, 1938, pp. 123–124)
3	Needs are the 'nutrients that are essential for growth, integrity, and well-being.'	(Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10)
4	Need is 'some kind of state of an individual when they miss/feel the shortage of (pejorative form) or are interested in something (positive form.)'	(Bartosik-Purgat, 2008, p. 137)
5	Need is 'a trait that impels an individual to pursue a goal through an action that also gives purpose, meaning and direction for the behavior of the individual.'	(Ward & Lasen, 2009, p. 1)
6	Needs are 'basic human requirements such as air, food, water, clothing and shelter.'	(Kotler et al, 2019, p. 9)
7	'For the anthropologist, needs are the requirements of a social life. To be a member of a community is to learn the needs of the community and to satisfy those needs through behaviors endorsed by the community.'	(Buttle, 1989, p. 205)
8	'Customer needs are a description of the benefits desired by customers.'	(Bayus, 2008, p. 119)
9	Needs are 'tensions that trigger mental activities.'	(Gross and Peterson, 1987, cited in Roberts et al, 2015, p. 265)

In definition 1 the term 'need' is defined in a very broad sense. The term 'something' is not clearly described, and meanings that can be associated to it could be almost anything. Need in definition 2 represents a mental construct. However, Deci & Ryan (2000) stated that this definition is so broad and that terms like motive, desire, or goal could be used as substitutes without losing any meaning. Psychological

development and health represent the contextual boundaries for definition 3. According to the Self-Determination Theory there are three essential needs for psychological growth and well-being: the needs 'for autonomy, competence, and relatedness' (Ryan & Deci, 2017, p. 10). Although in definition 4 need is also defined in a broad sense by the use of the words 'some kind', it implies that 'need' represents a felt state of a person. The end goal of need fulfilment is broad and it spans from preserving life (Taormina & Gao, 2013) to personal development and status (Biesok & Wyród-Wróbel, 2013). In definition 5 the term 'trait' probably refers to the terms 'characteristic' or 'feature' and is not associated with an individual's 'psychological trait'. Consequently, this definition too is pretty broad in scope. Although definition 6 is also broad in meaning, a list of requirements is presented for better understanding. A requirement, as a synonym of need, is equated with a physical object, like food, water, clothing, or psychological phenomena like 'recreation, education, and entertainment' (Kotler et al, 2019, p. 9). However, a question might be posed as to what falls under the category of basic human requirements, and also how to make a distinction between what is a basic requirement and what is not. Definition 8 relocates the concept of needs from a psychological to an anthropological context. Needs are to be understood from a social perspective. But again, 'needs' are described as 'requirements' which again is a broad term. Definition 9 treats 'needs' as a description of the benefits consumers are looking for in products and services. It seems that needs are equated with benefits. Definition 10 describes 'needs' as 'tensions' which is closely related to a felt state of an individual.

2.2 Needs and wants

'Wants' and 'needs' are closely related in marketing literature. Yet, the difference between the two terms is not so clear, insomuch that 'psychologists and economists still debate the exact meanings of need and want' (Kerin et al, 2014, p. 9). While some authors see 'needs' and 'wants' as synonyms, others make clear distinctions between them (Roberts et al, 2015). For example, 'wants' are defined 'as motives, felt deprivation, problems, or goals' (p. 264), while 'needs' are defined 'as wants, drives, desires, wishes, and so on' (p. 264). But what is a 'want'?

According to the Cambridge Business English Dictionary (n.d.) 'want' means 'a lack of something' or 'to need something', while Merriam-Webster (n.d.) defines it 'to have a strong desire for' or 'to have need of'. These definitions are so broad and

generic that are almost interchangeable with their own definitions of 'need', therefore it could be concluded that 'needs' and 'wants' are synonyms. However, in marketing literature the term 'want' is usually related to products or services that can fulfil consumer needs (McDonald & Dunbar, 2012; Grewal & Levy, 2013; Kotler & Keller, 2006), and are shaped by knowledge, culture, and personality (Kerin et al, 2014). For example, the role of marketing would be to convert a generic need (i.e., social need) into a want for a specific product (i.e., jeans) (Venugopal, 2010).

Although it seems that 'want' is easier to define compared to the term 'need', it is still difficult to distinguish between the two. It is especially hard to discern when needs translate into wants and vice versa, therefore in marketing theory this distinction is not necessarily made (Meler, 2005).

2.3 Characteristics of needs

Differences in understanding about what 'need' is generated an issue in defining one of its characteristics. Are 'needs' acquired through development and learning, or are they innate, coded into the human genome, is still a subject of contention (Sheldon & Schüler, 2011). Deci & Ryan (2000) define essential needs for psychological growth and well-being as innate. According to Schiffman & Wisenblit (2019), physiological needs that sustain physical existence are innate, while psychogenic needs are learned from our parents, social environment, and interactions with others. Pinson & Jolibert (2001, 25 in Zalega, 2014) recognize needs both as innate and acquired. According to Maslow, all five needs (physiological and psychological) of his famous hierarchy are innate and universal (Buttle, 1989). According to the social construction perspective, needs are understood as constructs of social processes (Varey, 1996). However, Murray (1938) and Baumeister & Leary (1995) admit whether any specific need is innate is difficult prove. In conclusion, it can be seen that there is no consensus about the nature of 'need'.

2.4 Needs and its synonyms

Sometimes the distinction between the terms 'need' and 'want' is not that clear. For example, the language associated with 'customer needs' vary across different disciplines such as marketing, engineering, and industrial design. Terms like needs, wants, attributes, features, requirements, specs, etc. are often used interchangeably

(Bayus, 2008). 'In product development literature the terms 'needs' and 'requirements' are sometimes used interchangeably with e.g., demands, wants, desires and wishes, to explain the input into the process' (Ericson et al, 2009, Perspective and motivation section, para. 3). In addition, in the industrial practice multiple terms are used as synonyms to refer to 'customer needs' like product attributes, consumer attributes and consumer requirements (Ulrich & Eppinger, 2011).

The use of the word 'need' in the product design sphere is used as synonym with the word benefit, where the high maneuverability of a compact truck is defined as benefit but also a need (Urban & Hauser, 2004). Also, Herrmann et al (2000) seem to equate the meaning of these two words by defining the class membership as the benefit component of a car while at the same time stating that 'the benefit components of a product (e.g. a car) reflect its ability to fulfill customers' needs, such as demonstrating class membership, conveying prestige, impressing others, enjoying safety' (p. 79) implying that class membership is a need but also a benefit. In the same industrial context, Griffin & Hauser (1993) state that a customer need is a description, in the customer's own words, of the benefit that he, she, or they want fulfilled by the product or service.

There is also a strong link between 'needs', 'benefits' and 'value', seemingly being synonyms. Van den Heuvel et al (2007) state that in marketing-oriented organizations the most important thing is 'to understand what consumers value in their product category, and to effectively and efficiently translate these consumer needs into concrete product offerings' (p. 296) seemingly equating 'value' with 'need'. They also state that 'crucial in the process of satisfying abstract consumer needs is the translation of these perceived benefits into concrete product characteristics actionable for optimizing product offerings' (p. 297) seemingly equating 'needs with 'benefits'. Customer value is defined as 'the benefits gained from the product or service, but it can also encompass the value to the customer of other constituents of the total offer such as surrounding services (maintenance or information, for example), channels and so on (McDonald & Dunbar, 2012, 8) but they also state that benefits are what the customers get that they explicitly need, seemingly equating 'needs' with 'benefits'.

2.5 Synthesis of the literature review

A short summary of the literature review will be presented that will be the basis for developing a discussion about the researched issue.

1. The concept of need is defined in different ways, in different contexts by different authors. There is no consensus and no unified definition of need, therefore the term 'need' cannot be explained coherently.
2. The term 'need' is described differently in terms of: a lack of something, a mental construct, a benefit, a conscious state of an individual, a tension, a trait, a requirement of a social life, a basic human requirement (food, air, water, ...). Consequently, there is an obvious disparity in understanding its essence.
3. It is difficult to make a clear distinction between 'needs' and 'wants' as they are closely related and similar in nature. Different authors define these terms in different ways, and debates about their exact meanings are still an ongoing process.
4. Some authors believe 'need' is an innate phenomenon while other believe it is a social construct and therefore acquired. It is very difficult to prove whether needs are innate or not, but it's also difficult to make a distinction between which needs are innate and which are acquired. If 'need' is innate then it cannot be created. Mainstream economic theory prefers to treat needs as innate.
5. Multiple synonyms of the term 'need' are presented in literature, like wants, benefits, desires, requirements, and not all authors define these terms in the same way. If the term 'need' lacks a comprehensive definition, how it is possible to link it to other terms? It indicates the fact that these terms are not well defined and therefore their synonymity is questionable.

3 Discussion and conclusion

Can marketers create needs using marketing tools? The presented analysis indicates a discrepancy in understanding of how 'need' is defined. This represents a fundamental problem in giving an answer to this controversial question, because the meaning of a term depends on its definition. The definition serves to define the treated concept, and without a definition the concept cannot be clearly understood.

Depending on the given definition, scholars will shape their understanding of the phenomenon and draw logical conclusions about it.

If there is no consensus about what 'need' is and multiple different definitions exist, if different terms are used as its synonyms, and if it is difficult to prove whether or not 'needs' are innate, how it is possible to state that marketers cannot create needs?

Therefore, it is not possible to give an answer to this question, not until a consensus is reached about what 'need' is with a unanimously created and accepted definition. In the current situation, the only option that remains is to favor one approach and definition over the other, or rely upon the voice of authority, in order to draw conclusions. This, however, does not reflect the reality of things. It is very probable that an individual will choose the approach and definition that best fits his beliefs.

Another important question arises. Because 'need' stands at the foundation of marketing, and if it is not possible to prove whether marketing can create needs or not, how is it possible to shape marketing activities correctly and achieve efficiency and success?

Finally, the analyzed problem necessitates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of 'need', otherwise only an assumption and not a claim can be made 'that marketing does or does not create needs'.

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