

Plato's allegory and the capitalist's world: A hermeneutical analysis of the effects of modern business and advertising practices on consumer rationality

Ibrahim Noorani *, Khurram Shakir, Nazia Abdul Rehman

Department of Public Administration, Benazir Bhutto Shaheed University Lyari, Karachi, Pakistan

Abstract: Plato is regarded as one of the finest men ever existed has presented mankind with concepts that are intellectual masterpieces. With his famous Allegory of Cave, Plato has painted the picture of human beings' inability to accept reality and truth upfront. Human beings are likely to compromise their rationality in order to opt for physical pleasures. This research paper attempts to incorporate Plato's Allegory to the marketing and advertising tactics commonly used by the capitalists and the corporate sector, who are constantly appealing to peoples' emotions allowing them to subjugate human rationality. This paper endeavors to examine how business enterprises influence human decision making by enforcing their own schema through celebrity endorsements, attractive labels and packaging, women objectification and self-personification just as Plato advocated about the behavior of chained individuals in the cave.

Keywords: Plato; Philosophy; Advertising; Business; Decision making; Consumer buying behavior

1. Introduction

Human Being is the most complex and yet at the same time the most interesting creature that operates on the face of this earth. However much of our thinking process is governed by what we are explicitly shown again and again. Despite being rational animals, while making most of our decisions we have a tendency to compromise our rationality and make a decision on impulses.

Modern advertising and business practices adopted by the capitalists for the promotion of their goods and services have emerged as effective tools to trigger human impulses and compromise human rationality. Significant researches have been done over the years that have attempted to uphold the notion that exciting packaging, celebrity endorsements, and self-disclosure are very effective strategies to promote products and services, commonly used by organizations.

Amin, et al. (2015), suggested that packaging style & design is the most integral element to gain customer attraction. They argue that packaging serves as a significant tool to increase product sales and could be treated as an important influencer to purchase decision making.

Nyarko, Asimah, Agbemava, & Tsetse (2015), resulted that celebrity endorsements have increased over the years and is considered as a vital tool for promotion of product and services. They argued that celebrity endorsement has evolved into a multi-million-dollar investment that marketers engage in to influence consumer purchase decisions. They

revealed that celebrity endorsements are appealing and attractive to consumers, especially the youth.

According to Ahmed, et al. (2015), advertisements endorsed by celebrities are more appealing and attractive to consumers. They concluded that a positive relationship exists between celebrity endorsement and buying decisions of consumers. They managed to establish that there exists a meaningful relationship between celebrity endorsements and consumers' buying behavior.

As observed by Raheem et al. (2014), labeling & packaging is the factor that is of primal importance. It is further concluded that the packaging elements like its Colour, Packaging material, Design of Wrapper and innovation are more crucial factors when consumers making any buying decision. Finally, it has also been concluded that Packaging is one of the most important and powerful factors, which influence the consumer's purchase decision.

Deliya & Parmar (2012), studied that labeling and packaging are likely to influence buying behavior. Sales are also likely to increase as customers are drawn to packages that are appealing to consumers.

An obsession with portraying women of white complexion and widespread endorsements of face whitening beauty creams have also cast a shadow upon women that beauty means being fair in color. As pointed out by McKinley & Hyde (1996), the cultural influences of British colonization have led people of the subcontinent to behave like second class citizens by inducing a sense of shame with respect to their skin color and so came the ideas of color superiority which is being encashed by television and advertisements.

It is established research that celebrity endorsements and the packaging's capacity to

* Corresponding Author.

influence customer decisions are more significant constituent than human rationality. Eye-catching depictions and clichéd slogans impact the final purchase decision of the consumers to a greater extent.

This research attempts to undertake a comparative analysis of the above-discussed phenomena with the famous Allegory of the Cave propounded by Plato which sketches the fundamental human behavior that is derived by ignorance and the adherence to the kind of distorted phenomena ultimately projected as reality when it is anything but that.

1.1. Research objectives

The purpose of this research is to analyze:

- The role of capitalistic thought on human rational decision making
- The influence of modern business & advertising practices on consumer behavior
- The efficacy of Plato's thought in modern times

1.2. Research scope

The scope of this research extends to all students of business ethics and advertising ethics. The Philosophical idea of the Allegory of Cave has a significant impact on an individual's capacity to learn and how one accepts an illusionary depiction of tainted reality in his/her daily life.

2. Research methodology

During the latter half of the 20th century, interest in qualitative research increased and the value of qualitative work in addressing matters of equity and social justice. Qualitative studies are appropriate when there is a lack of literature while quantitative studies revolve around a problem for which there is an abundance of literature. Qualitative studies often derive information on why there is a lack of literature on a particular topic, whereas quantitative studies traditionally evolve around a problem for which there is an abundance of literature (Bazeley & Richards (2000), Creswell (2017)).

Qualitative Researchers are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, and social roles (Lune & Berg, (2016)).

I have attempted to take a holistic approach in my research by adopting a *hermeneutical and interpretive framework*, where historical and social contexts are taken into consideration. *Idealistic* and *Social Construction* approaches are also used to support the application of concepts that are to be explored in the research. Since Constructivism and Objectivism are core elements of my research, *Grounded Theory Research* is the primary qualitative Methodology (Willig (2013) and Wilson, 2014).

I have adopted absolute library research for this paper. I have collected articles from prominent journals and referred to classical texts to present the concepts. *Tools of logic* and *critical thinking* are also extensively applied while deducing the elements of analysis.

3. Research analysis

Business is considered as a regular activity carried out for the basic purpose of making money and earning profit. However, the loss is also the other side of the coin and at one point in time or more it becomes inevitable. Nonetheless, it is imperative that business is always accompanied by risk and has the innate elements of hope and fear rooted in all its activities.

Keeping these two elements intact, capitalism has produced business analyst and marketing specialist that have developed a habit of appealing to peoples' hopes and fears to promote and sell their products and have managed to allow human rationality to be compromised for the sake of pleasure.

Plato in his republic presents us with a remarkable parable commonly known as the allegory of the cave. The allegory starts off with a group of people chained up in a cage in such a manner that they can only look at the wall in front of them and are unable to turn their heads around sideways or back. There in the cave, just at the other end of the wall, there is a fire lightened up and in between these chained individuals and the enlightening fire there constantly move around a few individuals with symbolic statues and idols upon their heads. The because of the fire the shadows of these individuals are being cast upon the wall and so the chained people the shadow images of these moving people along with the objects (Plato,1966).

Now since they've been chained and imprisoned for a very long time in the cave, they've grown accustomed to witnessing the shadow images of these moving objects that keep on reflecting upon the wall they are facing. Amongst these chained individuals, a couple of people develop the ability to recognize the images of these moving objects with precision and make predictions about trends and patterns with which they tend to move. Now, these individuals emerge out as the wisest and knowledgeable in the group because of their ability to estimate and make decent predictions.

Somehow, one individual amongst the chained group manages to break his chains and releases himself from the bondage. He then turns around and looks at the moving individuals with statues and idols on their heads and behind them a light because which their reflection is being cast upon the front wall. However, the light starts to hurt his eyes and is in pain since this makes it hard for him to see the shadow-casting objects. He then turns back to the wall looking at the shadows that he is used to seeing and realizing that they are not reality but rather shadows of the moving objects.

The freed prisoner, bewildered and struggling, drags himself out of the cave only to witness the ever-shining bright sunlight. His eyes are overwhelmed with the radiant light of the sun and he is blinded for some time. Slowly his eyes adjust to the sunlight and gradually experience the outside world and are able to look at the trees and stars and moon and eventually the bright sun itself. At that moment it dawns upon him that the outside world is real and superior to the world he had lived inside the cave for so many years.

Now he would start counting his blessings and would wish to deliver his fellow cave companions from the darkness of ignorance to the light of truth and knowledge. However, the returning prisoner who has now grown accustomed to the sunlight when he returns back into the cave is blinded by the darkness, just he was blinded before when he stepped outside the cave into the sunlight. And so inside the cave he is unable to adjust to the darkness, starts to stagger and behaving heretically. The people in the cave, from his irregular behavior, discern that his passage outside of the cave has harmed him and that they must not take the same journey or else would start behaving insanely like the blinded man. They do not accept what the freed prisoner had to say about the outside world and silence him once and for all.

This allegory of the cave is not just a parable but is a symbolic representation of the reality of the world in which we live. The majority of the people are so accustomed to seeing the world as it appears in front of them that they do not wish to go beyond or contradict the orthodox beliefs and doctrines set by the religious authorities and more dominantly the capitalist.

Capitalism upholds the maxim of profit maximization and can push to any limits to achieve its goals. These capitalists are the individuals who keep on moving with various objects or in other words products and services which the material minded world believes to be of utmost necessity for human existence. A few individuals who receive a set standard education in social, applied and management sciences are the ones' who are able to recognize the methods and workings of these objects whose shadows have been cast upon in the entire world. And so they all tend to believe that this is what the world is all about, as symbolically represented in the allegory as the wise and knowledgeable men (Plato,1974).

An entire industry of celebrity endorsement where advertising campaigns are launched using the images of famous persons plays a significant role in assisting the capitalists to sell their products or services. Instead of exploring the pros & cons of the product and service itself, people are hooked upon accepting the commodity or service on the celebrity face value.

The enticing and tempting labeling & packaging of similar products that are made to appear different is a common practice. The reality is the same but the shadows of labeling and packaging inveigle simple

minds into spending a good amount of their hard-earned money over products that are similar in nature but differentiated in price structures.

An overwhelming number of smartphones being in-fluxed into the economy has trampled consumers into a decision making dilemma. Every year prominent smartphone manufacturers introduce a new line of their products that only have minor changes and adjustments as compared to the previous versions. However, every time they are about to introduce a new product they blemish the older versions with some errors and glorify the latest as the best there is yet in the world (Taylor, 1960).

Such images are glamorized so frequently that despite being fallacious they appear to be absolutely logical. The brand promotion and advertising through sparkling celebrity endorsements and the cultural depictions of the rich & famous are being idolized so extensively that they have to a greater extent compromised the collective rationality of consumers.

For e.g. it is common knowledge that excessive intake of carbonated drinks puts its consumers at high risk of health problems. Carbonated drinks have a tendency to elevate insulin levels, and elevated insulin levels are the foundation of nearly every chronic disease, including cancer, diabetes, premature aging, arthritis, and osteoporosis. Despite knowing all this, consumers are being tantalized by the images of youthful celebrities and sports personalities, jumping around all over the place with catchy phrase like, "*More bounce to the ounce*", "*Live it Now*", "*Refresh your world*" and "*Drink in Excitement*" so on and so forth. When it is clear that such words do not actually represent the reality of the products and is actually the opposite of these phrases, people still buy them as oppose to human rationality.

The inducement of pleasure and excitement via advertisement is a common practice amongst the capitalists. The excessive depiction of sexual content in the promotion of quotidian products is an appeal to the instinctual self of the consumers. The phrase, "*Sex Sells*" has attained the status of an axiom in the marketing world.

The objectification of women in the media has become a widespread practice. As research by Berberick (2010) television advertisements buttress and try to project as a normal practice women's bodies in a sexual manner as they feel it would play an important part in selling their products. Another shadow image being created when women are being depicted sexually and objectified in the name of liberalism and modernity.

According to Ullah (2014) and Alblooshi (2015), people who consider themselves as self-confident are likely to post a number of selfies on social networking websites as compared to individuals with low self-esteem.

The growing narcissistic trend of self-images, commonly known as, "*Selfie*", is a way the advertisers and marketers are utilizing to promote

their products. From beauty and personal care to the airline industry, selfies have become a popular method for brand promotions. A famous brand of chips has developed their chips package in shape of a smile and has encouraged people to take selfies with an empty pack and post it on the social web, that ultimately promotes their products, despite being harmful in its consumption.

4. Conclusion

People tend to behave in such a manner because we are chained individuals who are comfortable in believing the shadowy images on the wall shown to us by the Capitalists rather than exploring reality and truth by ourselves.

The structures of knowledge developed by the field specialists are so volatile that no one ever really knows anything completely. So, to rely upon the information of others becomes necessary. Our business education and the curriculum in universities across the country are well suited to equip students with the skills necessary to assume clerical jobs at the hands of the capitalists. This education, however, lacks the capacity to enable students to become entrepreneurs and play a productive role in the economy. And so, we are nothing but the chained individuals whom Plato acknowledges as a gathering of ignorant people accustomed to seeing the world as shadow images.

Business specialists and celebrities unknowingly but willingly become puppets at the hands of these capitalists and the masses that tend to follow the experts and celebs either because of fear of being outcasted or hope of becoming like them, eventually submit their rationality and accept what is being shown to them as true and real.

This is indeed a horrible practice on part of the capitalists and business owners but has become a common exercise throughout the world. However, they are not to be blamed because it is the core nature of capitalists to maximize their profits to the highest extent. So, the responsibility lies with the individual, not to succumb to the pleasures of the body but rather develop a buying behavior on the basis of rationality that could ultimately be beneficial for the spiritual and material self of the consumer.

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