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EDITORIAL

Perspectives on socially responsible marketing: the chasm widens

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There have been different perspectives on marketing's role in social responsibility in an organizational context. In this issue, *AMS Review* provides a debate on the role of socially responsible marketing (SRM) that is missing in the literature. This debate emerged from Gaski's (2022, this issue) article "Toward Social Responsibility, Not the Social Responsibility Semblance: Marketing Does Not Need a Conscience." Gaski questions the involvement of marketing in addressing social issues and whether marketing has the competency and authority to determine what is socially responsible in the broader organizational context. His perspective is that marketers should focus on consumers, generate revenue, and make a profit for shareholders. He bases much of his support on the views of Levitt (1958) and Friedman (1970).

To respond to Gaski's position, six knowledgeable scholars agreed to analyze his views and offer their perspectives on SRM. Martin and Burpee (2022) see marketing as a problem solver and offer support for marketing's role in addressing social issues. Geert Demuijnck and Patrick Murphy view Gaski's paper as radical and unrealistic. Their position is that marketing has a conscience. While these two commentaries challenge Gaski's views, two commentaries support, explain, or partially support Gaski's concerns about SRM involvement. Ahluwalia (2022) addresses Gaski's position from the viewpoint of classical economics. Most marketers have not considered a critique of SRM based on economic theory. Cronin (2022) explicates his position based on marketing theory and practice. He attempts to explain Gaski's position related to critical errors inherent in how marketing scholars have addressed SRM.

AMS Review provides the perfect platform to permit a critical analysis of SRM. One perspective of scholars is to define SRM from a macro and normative perspective based on institutional economics, moral philosophy, and stakeholder theory (Laczniak & Shultz, 2021). Another approach is to place the definition of SRM in an instrumental context to frame academic research and practice (Ferrell & Ferrell, 2022). Gaski's perspective, based on economic theory, is instrumental or strategic. Management scholars view social responsibility as contested. This relates to the stream of research on normative versus instrumental views of social responsibility. These opposing perspectives are evident in the Gaski article and four commentaries. A normative view of SRM should not conflict with a strategic instrumental approach. Hopefully, these two perspectives can be reconciled in offering practical guidance from SRM to provide directions for research and practice.

I will attempt to provide a background based on some leading authorities' views on social responsibility. First, Peter Drucker as a legendary business scholar has views on social responsibility that relate to this debate. Drucker's (1970) views were not addressed in the Gaski paper or the commentaries. Drucker (1970), Friedman (1970), and Levitt (1958) stand out for voicing concern for firm performance and a customer orientation. Kotler (2015) is a strong supporter of SRM and is concerned about the evils of profits at the expense of SRM. Some of Kotler's views were briefly addressed by Demuijnck and Murphy. Finally, abstracts of the Gaski article and the commentaries follow to provide an overview of the debate.

Views from Drucker, Friedman, Levitt, and Kotler

According to Peter Drucker, all organizations and institutions have two responsibilities, performance and the community (Hesselbein, 2010). Leaders need a spirit of performance based on ethical conduct. While workers are just as important as profits, there are some differences between Drucker's view of social responsibility and the way social responsibility is embraced by many today. His corollaries to social responsibility include (Cohen, 2010):

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1. The organizations' first responsibility must always be its own mission regardless of other factors.
2. Government has limited ability to successfully implement social programs.
3. Good intentions are not necessarily socially responsible due to unintended negative impacts.
4. Drucker boiled it down in ethics to "First, do no harm."

Drucker believed that firms should resist solving social issues if it would impair performance, exceed their competence, or usurp the legitimate authority, such as the federal government (Smith, 2010).

Friedman believed that in a corporation, executives are an employee of the owners, and they should make as much money as possible (Krugman, 2007). He believed only people have social responsibilities, and a corporation does not have these responsibilities. On the other hand, Friedman thought that a corporate executive has many voluntary responsibilities and can include the feeling of charity and support for the community and country. He defined social responsibility as individuals' decisions to support worthy projects and donations to the community and country. In these respects, the executive is acting as a principal, not an agent. As an example, he believed that pollution should only be reduced based on the interest of the firm or as required by law. Shareholders and consumers can make decisions on social responsibility issues.

Friedman and Drucker had different views of social responsibility. Friedman's classic statement is "there is one and only one social responsibility of business: to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game, which is to say, engages in open and free competition without deception or fraud" (Friedman, 1970). On the other hand, Drucker felt that the first responsibility of business is to make a profit, but it would be tyrannical on their part to ignore their responsibilities to society (Drucker, 1993). Therefore, while Friedman is taking an extreme position of limited or no concern about social responsibility, Drucker takes a more 'middle of the road' perspective about the primary goal of profitability but also an obligation to social responsibility.

Levitt's (1958) often documented essay on the dangers of social responsibility rests on the belief that a firm should produce a profit by any means that are coherent and look after its own continued existence. Levitt also equated business to war and said businesses should fight gallantly, daringly, but not always morally. As Martin and Burpee (2022) point out, Levitt's later writings in 1983, "The Marketing Imagination," suggested the need for corporate purpose and that profit is not the only purpose of a business. Levitt turned his focus to creating and keeping a customer by solving customers' problems. Examining Levitt's body of work today would align him with a market orientation more than a stakeholder orientation.

More recently, Philip Kotler has become a critic of marketing's emphasis on profits and the failure of capitalism to address economic and social problems (Kotler, 2015). Kotler addresses issues such as poverty, job creation, environmental costs, and the need to link public and private initiatives. Kotler (2011) believes marketing can promote responsible consumption and his views are that profit is a villain in efforts to become more sustainable. Kotler questions marketing as an important partner in promoting the general welfare and is more concerned about social responsibility issues that impact marketing performance and profitability.

Total Corporate Responsibility (TCR) is an extreme form of CSR that seeks to change economic and political systems to hold firms responsible and accountable for negative impacts on society. TCR seems to be exactly what Kotler advocates (Kotler, 2015). This would involve economic and political systems to force firms to address socio-ecological issues and sustainability. It is believed that TCR will be driven by excellent corporate governance and management leadership to drive solutions to humanity's social and economic problems. This approach to social responsibility would require a systems approach holding firms accountable for all negative impacts on society for their operations. Therefore, Kotler is on one polar end of extreme support for social responsibility with limited concern for profits, and Friedman is on the other end, viewing profits as being most important and social responsibility as not much of a concern. Drucker and Levitt are in the middle with a support of profits but also a concern about social responsibility and purpose when compatible with profitability.

Gaski (2022) would probably reject Kotler's polar position that the role of marketing should be focused on the common good and profits are secondary or detrimental to society. Gaski interprets Friedman and Levitt as focusing on profits and leaving social responsibility to the government. This is stated by Gaski, "…leave the social policy decisions to the appropriate groups: the overall public itself and chosen representatives." Gaski's social responsibility translates into business operating within the law and not engaging in ethical or social judgments. If business deviates from what society wants, law and public pressure through the government will bring it back into compliance. Friedman and Levitt believe that social responsibility would result in unintended consequences and the decline of capitalism (Friedman, 1970; Levitt, 1958). While Friedman, Levitt, and Drucker were solid supporters of capitalism, Kotler believes it is harming society. Gaski's position is to go beyond Friedman and Levitt and address questions that they did not answer.

Challenging social responsibility

Ahluwalia (2022), in this issue, supports the Gaski position based on classical economics in terms of property rights, individual freedoms, separation of government and business, and accountability. He also points out that market orientation literature focuses on customers and competition and less on other stakeholders. Therefore, firms adopting a marketing strategy based on market orientation are not embracing a stakeholder orientation that focuses on all stakeholders. This would be more in line with the Gaski position.

Cronin (2022), in this issue, states that a debate on social responsibility is timely and commendable and will advance the marketing literature. Ahluwalia (2022) focuses on Gaski's criticisms associated with classical economic theory. Cronin addresses issues in marketing theory and practice. An important point that many miss is that Gaski is not opposed to social responsibility but rather feels the best way to execute it is not through marketing. He feels business executives are not qualified to make public policy decisions. Gaski believes marketers should not be empowered to determine what is best for consumers' well-being or be social policy arbitrators for society. He contends that marketing decisions should not take away from the rights of consumers and the government to determine what is best for society.

Finally, Cronin develops a framework based on Gaski that marketing theory and practice should acknowledge that all social responsibility describes a marketing process where the well-being of both providers (i.e., users and society) are considered in appropriate strategies. The government is positioned as the determinant authority in deciding the direction and implementation of social responsibility. Cronin believes the behavioral emphasis in academic marketing ignores the history of marketing and how it has been transformative, focusing on consumer well-being for a hundred years.

Support of social responsibility

In support of social responsibility, Martin and Burpee (2022) support socially responsible marketing (SRM) based on marketing's problem-solving abilities. They are in favor of marketing helping to solve economic and social issues such as hunger and nutrition, poverty, and sustainability. This position is based on consumers and shareholders supporting SRM. Businesses that embrace SRM have tangible consumer and performance benefits. Political and regulatory systems that are designed to solve social problems are dysfunctional and engage in limited proactive results. They suggest a normative view of SRM based on the definition by Laczniak and Shultz (2021). This perspective is based on corporate citizenship, stakeholder orientation, and environmental sustainability. This normative view is not tied to the financial performance of the firm.

Levitt (1983) is credited with advancing fundamental marketing concepts (e.g., segmentation, differentiation, and relationship marketing) as an overarching firm strategy. Levitt is seen as a boundary spanner and challenges Gaski's view of Levitt as not supporting SRM. Martin and Burpee (2022) indicate that if you look at Levitt's total body of work relating to corporate purpose, it is transcendent of profits.

Gaski claims that government and public policy should maintain responsibility for societal well-being, including socio-ecological issues. Martin and Burpee challenge the ability of the government to solve these problems because of political divisiveness and the inability to address these issues. When legislation passes it is often diluted and often does not assess negative social side effects. There is also the concern that business has played a significant role in shaping legislation and regulation through lobbying. Business and SRM are viewed by Martin and Burpee as perfectly poised to solve the complex issues of society.

Demuijnck and Murphy (2022) believe that Gaski oversimplifies the participants in social responsibility. The dynamics involving consumer and public pressure for social responsibility, including initiatives by corporations, have evolved over time. In addition, Gaski fails to show an understanding of the relationship of ethical theories to social responsibility. Empirical claims are not supported by any form of evidence. Most importantly, Demuijnck and Murphy believe that social responsibility has already been institutionalized within firms, government, and society.

This debate over the definition, importance, and implementation of SRM is both timely and important in understanding the role of social responsibility in an organization. This debate is framed from a marketing perspective, but the marketing function is only one participant in social responsibility decision making. The Gaski article and four commentaries are reviewed to compare and contrast positions.

Toward social responsibility, not the social responsibility semblance: Marketing does not need a conscience

John F. Gaski

In this essay, Gaski challenges the notion that marketing must be socially responsible, arguing that socially responsible marketing is "naïve, superfluous, incoherent, and ultimately dysfunctional for its intended beneficiaries." Gaski argues that the contrarian perspective he supports has been resisted by scholars but deserves scholarly media attention. The author challenges the definitions offered for conscience-driven or socially responsible marketing behavior in the literature. Gaski argues that since it cannot be known what actions truly promote the social interest, the most one can hope is that marketing will *try* to serve the social interest. He says this is problematic as it puts unelected and non-accredited individuals (i.e., marketing managers) in the private sector in a position of making public-welfare decisions. Gaski offers real-world examples to support his perspective.

Gaski questions the involvement of marketing in addressing social issues and believes that business executives (e.g., marketing managers) are not qualified to make public policy decisions. His perspective is that entrusting unqualified individuals to make public-welfare decisions is likely to produce poor decisions and that marketers should focus on consumers, generate revenue, and make a profit for shareholders. He writes marketers should not veer from marketing's narrow economic purpose unless it receives a clear indication (e.g., government regulation or market pressure) to do otherwise. Thus, socially responsible marketing may result in socially *irresponsible* action. The author says that though the government may not adequately address public causes, the blame should not be placed on marketing or business.

The author acknowledges that relying on ethical consensus rather than marketer conscience is challenging because there are many competing ethical systems. However, marketers can operate within the law, which reflects a society's boundaries of right and wrong, without making its own judgments on serving the social interest. The author urges readers to consider that the best way for marketers to advance social responsibility may be by leaving social policy decisions to the public itself and elected and appointed officials. Gaski says the case made in his essay is his attempt to restore marketing's identity.

A critique of corporate social responsibility in light of classical economics

Saurabh Ahluwalia

Ahluwalia (2022) addresses Gaski's position that marketers should not make social-welfare decisions from the viewpoint of classical economics which holds that managers are agents of the shareholders. With this reasoning, he argues that corporations should make decisions that align with the wishes of their shareholders, which generally results in profit maximization being the main goal. Thus, the author supports Gaski's argument that marketing should not lose sight of its economic purpose and proposes that marketing should focus on maximizing revenues by satisfying customer wants and needs and ensuring efficient resource utilization.

Like Gaski, Ahluwalia draws on Friedman (1970) and Levitt's (1958) argument that by maximizing profits for shareholders and operating within the law, businesses are fulfilling their social responsibility. Unlike Gaski, however, Ahluwalia says focusing on marketing as the primary social responsibility decision maker is too narrow as many social responsibility decisions are made by top management and the board of directors. The author highlights the conflict between CSR and shareholder primacy viewpoints. For example, he argues that sometimes social responsibility and profit motives are aligned. A conflict occurs when managers have to make a decision benefiting one stakeholder group (e.g., employees, customers, or citizens) at the expense of shareholders. Next, Ahluwalia compares market orientation and stakeholder orientation. He defines a market orientation as one that focuses on the market (i.e., customers and competitors) and a stakeholder orientation as one that considers the needs of all stakeholders (i.e., customers, community, employees, suppliers, investors, and more).

Ahluwalia says that blindly chasing corporate social responsibility goes against classical economics. In the name of social responsibility, he argues, one can justify decisions that lead to losses for shareholders in the name of "some greater good," though it is hard to determine or measure the greater good. He also argues that freedom can be affected by blindly following social responsibility. For example, allocating resources to corporate social responsibility initiatives removes the control of cash flows from shareholders and puts it in the hands of managers. Additionally, these managers can potentially wield great power when it comes to societal change as they impinge on the social welfare function of government. Ahluwalia believes business should focus on profits and allow the government to regulate business as needed.

Marketing's new myopia: Expanding the social responsibilities of marketing managers

J. Joseph Cronin, Jr.

In this commentary, Cronin explicates Gaski's (2022) position based on marketing theory and practice and attempts to explain his position related to critical errors inherent in how marketing scholars have addressed socially responsible marketing. He states that the debate about social responsibility is timely and commendable. Cronin emphasizes that Gaski does not suggest social responsibility is relevant and, in fact, says that it is a marketing tactic that can generate customer satisfaction and revenues. Cronin examines and comments on Gaski's belief that marketing does not need a social conscience and suggests that it should not be the responsibility of marketers to determine what is socially responsible. He writes that readers may not understand that Gaski's question is not whether marketing or corporations have a responsibility to society but rather how to best execute that social responsibility.

Cronin lists three implications for marketing theory that arise from Gaski's essay: (1) Gaski describes social responsibility as a strategy to achieve customer satisfaction or avoid regulation; (2) Gaski suggests that successful social responsibility strategies satisfy the well-being of both providers (i.e., stockholder/owner) and users (i.e., consumers); (3) well-being should be co-created by both providers and users for social responsibility initiatives to be implemented. Cronin develops a framework based on Gaski's essay. He believes Gaski contributes to marketing theory by conceptualizing social responsibility as the *process* by which well-being is created for both providers and users rather than an *outcome*. Thus, he claims that provider well-being, user well-being, and societal well-being are the three important outcomes that define marketplace success.

Cronin writes that we must reconsider how we define social marketing and social responsibility, suggesting these two concepts should be differentiated. He claims there is a rapidly accelerating myopic drift of marketing theory relative to the role of social responsibility and briefly considers the history of marketing's transformation. He believes the behavioral emphasis in the study of marketing ignores the history of marketing and how it has been transformative, focusing on consumer well-being for a hundred years. To conclude, Cronin says that Gaski's essay is noteworthy as an incentive for marketing scholars to reexamine social responsibility.

Why should marketers be forced to ignore their moral awareness? a reply to Gaski

Geert Demuijnck and Patrick E. Murphy

In this commentary, Demuijnck and Murphy disagree with Gaski's position, calling his statements radical and aggressive. The authors offer four main criticisms of Gaski's argumentation: (1) it glosses over the relationship between ethics and regulation, (2) it makes oversimplified assumptions related to the certainty or uncertainty of ethical claims, (3) it adopts an 'all or nothing' view of responsibility, and (4) it makes empirical claims without evidence. Demuijnck and Murphy say Gaski displays bad faith in his selection of real-world examples.

First, the authors believe Gaski overlooks and oversimplifies fundamentals in the dynamics between ethics and regulation. Demuijnck and Murphy discuss how legislation against deceptive promotion and product responsibility more generally has evolved over time. They write that the evolution of expectations of the public and of regulation has been influenced by many forces, including initiatives from corporations. While Gaski acknowledges a delay between the formation of the public will and corresponding public pressure through law or the market, his recommendation that marketing should accept this delay rather than take action is not justified, according to the authors. Second, the authors state that Gaski makes a simplistic assumption about the certainty or uncertainty of ethical claims. Demuijnck and Murphy believe that Gaski's position—that when marketers are not sure with 100% certainty of what is the best choice for society, they should not take action—is too far removed from the realities people face. The authors also hold that Gaski convolutes various ethical theories and debates to support his position, providing several examples to support this perspective.

Third, Demuijnck and Murphy argue that Gaski's argumentation lives in an overly simplistic world where responsibility is divided between agents (e.g., corporations, consumers, the government), disregarding the existence of *partial* or *shared* responsibility. Last, the authors write that Gaski makes empirical claims that are not backed up with evidence. They find fault with his anonymized, so-called 'real-world' examples, though some are in fact not real. They question how Gaski can make empirical claims without referring to empirical research. To conclude, Demuijnck and Murphy state that marketing executives are not quite as powerful and omnipotent as Gaski suggests.

Marketing as problem solver: In defense of social responsibility

Kelly D. Martin and Stasha Burpee

Martin and Burpee see marketing as a problem solver and offer support for marketing's role in addressing social issues. This commentary defends socially responsible marketing as being more important now than ever before. First, the authors distinguish between marketing ethics and social responsibility. *Marketing ethics* typically involves processes and risks internally while *social responsibility* acts as the bridge between internal firm functional areas with external stakeholder groups. This commentary builds on existing literature by offering a contemporary perspective that supports the role of socially responsible marketing today and challenging its critics. The authors support the notion that marketing is a powerful and effective problem solver and agree that when marketing addresses societal problems strategically, it creates shared value.

The authors identify three forces that make socially responsible marketing necessary. First, consumers and investors increasingly value and expect socially responsible marketing. According to a Nielsen survey, most consumers are willing to pay a premium for sustainable products and services. The preference for socially responsible offerings is even stronger with younger generations of consumers. Second, businesses have embraced and prioritized social responsibility and have enjoyed tangible customer and performance benefits from those business practices. Third, current political and regulatory systems have insufficiently addressed societal problems. Martin and Burpee question the ability of the government to solve societal problems because of political divisiveness and the inability to address these issues. Gaski (2022) says the government should be responsible for societal well-being, but Martin and Burpee believe that corporations are in a better position to positively impact societal well-being, especially in the areas that align with their product market domains. With these three forces in mind, the authors argue that socially responsible marketing is not only productive but necessary.

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