

Sustainability of What in Marketing?: A Critical Discussion on the Discourse Consistency of Post-Modern Marketing in the Mass Consumption Economy

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ABSTRACT

Consumption is one of the main factors of the Post-modern social structure, which is the final point reached by humanity by evolving from religion to science and from science to consumption. So, it is not possible to understand today's structure without considering consumption. It is important to understand both consumer decisions and behaviors and marketing theory and practice, not only to understand the economic structure, but also to understand the post-modern society. When the marketing literature is reviewed, although there is a lot of methodological diversity in post-modern marketing methods, these methods are defined and applied in a certain way. However, when evaluated in terms of consumption philosophy, important discussion points arise. One of the issues that needs to be discussed is the difference in the discourse and practice of sustainability marketing. Because of air pollution, climate change, global warming and the decrease in natural resources, sustainability continues to exist as an important and up-to-date field in terms of economy. In this study, the reality of what is sustainable and what is at the core of sustainability marketing is discussed. Although the discourse of sustainability marketing is to protect nature and natural resources and leave a sustainable nature and production opportunities for future generations, this situation differs in practice. In this study, it was concluded that, contrary to the discourse of sustainability marketing, it aims to make the economic growth sustainable, which has become a dogma of neoliberal economy. When this situation is examined in terms of both marketing and consumer behavior, it is understood that both brands and consumers aim not to protect nature, but to continue consumption and make macroeconomic growth sustainable. This situation was examined with a critical approach in this study and suggestions were developed through alternative approaches, considering the concept of the priority of essence.

Pazarlamada Neyin Sürdürülebilirliği?: Kitle Tüketim Ekonomisinde Post-Modern Pazarlamanın Söylem Tutarlılığı Üzerine Eleştirel Bir Tartışma

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ÖZET

Dinden bilime, bilimden de tüketime evrilerek gelişerek insanlığın geldiği son nokta olan Post-modern sosyal yapının oluşmasında tüketim ana etkenlerden bir tanesidir. Öyle ki günümüz yapısını tüketimi dikkate almadan anlamak mümkün değildir. Bu sebeple sadece ekonomik yapıyı anlamak için değil, bir bütün halinde post-modern toplumu anlamak için hem tüketiciler karar ve davranışlarını hem de pazarlama teori ve pratiğini anlamak büyük önem taşımaktadır. Pazarlama literatürü incelendiğinde her ne kadar post-modern pazarlama yöntemlerinde çok sayıda yöntemsel çeşitlilik bulunsa da bu yöntemler genel çerçeveden sınırları belirli bir şekilde tanımlanmakta ve uygulanmaktadır. Ancak tüketim felsefesi açısından değerlendirildiğinde önemli tartışma noktaları ortaya çıkmaktadır. Tartışılması gereken konulardan bir tanesi de sürdürülebilirlik pazarlamanın söylem ve uygulamasındaki farklılıktır. Çünkü hava kirliliği, iklim değişikliği, küresel ısınma, ekonomik süreçlerin doğaya verdiği zarar ve doğal kaynaklardaki azalış nedeniyle sürdürülebilirlik ekonomi açısından önemli ve güncelliğini koruyan bir alan olarak varlığını devam ettirmektedir. Bu çalışmada da sürdürülebilirlik pazarlamanın özünde neyin sürdürülebilirliğinin gerçekliği tartışılmıştır. Sonuç olarak her ne kadar sürdürülebilirlik pazarlamanın söylemi doğanın ve doğal kaynakların korunması ve gelecek nesiller için de sürdürülebilir bir doğa ve üretim bırakmak olsa da pratikte bu durum farklılık göstermektedir. Bu çalışmada sürdürülebilirlik pazarlaması söyleminin aksine neoliberal ekonominin bir dogması haline gelen ekonominin sayısal olarak büyütülmesinin sürdürülebilir kılınması hedeflediği sonucuna ulaşılmıştır. Bu durum hem pazarlama hem de tüketici davranışları açısından incelendiğinde hem markaların hem de tüketicilerin aslında doğayı korumayı değil, tüketime devam etmeyi ve makro ekonomik büyümeyi sürdürülebilir kılmayı hedefledikleri anlaşılmaktadır. Bu durum çalışmada eleştirel bir yaklaşımla incelenmiş ve özün önceliği kavramı dikkate alınarak alternatif yaklaşımlar üzerinden öneriler geliştirilmiştir.

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INTRODUCTION

Understandings in the economic structure, which is one of the determining factors on the social structure, actually affect that society in terms of ontological discourses. However, it is important to correctly distinguish between the discourses of the economic structure and the applications seen in practice. Because the discourses of the dominant economic ideology and practical applications differ. Examination of practical realities ensures that essence is prioritized and ensures that both research and philosophical discussions are closer to reality.

Economy has a significant impact on the post-modern social structure. Because both global data and country or regional comparisons are made through economic data. As a result of this, the main goals are to monetize everything and turn it into a tool of exchange, in parallel with the Neoliberal economy (Şahin, 2021: 161), which is today's dominant economic understanding. Thus, a more effective use of resources is aimed in everything that is priced. In other words, in the Neoliberal economy, it is accepted that maximum resource efficiency is achieved thanks to everything being monetized and traded in self-organized markets (Stiglitz, 2008). Although there is such an acceptance on the macroeconomic scale, when it comes to evaluating economic data, the myth that a statistically growing economy is good continues to exist. This myth threatens the sustainable use of limited natural resources. In fact, at this point today, the danger of the world becoming unlivable is being discussed in contexts such as global warming. At this point reached in terms of macroeconomics, marketing practices continue intensively in terms of the sustainability of the current economic system. This topic constitutes the section of this study.

In an economy where the aim is to increase economic data statistically, marketing practices inevitably become the locomotive of the economy. Similarly, the fact that today's economy has gone beyond the consumption economy and become a mass consumption society (Matsuyama, 2002:1035) is an indication of the significant impact of marketing. However, marketing as the triggering force of consumption in the post-modern period, developing postmodern methods such as green marketing and sustainable marketing has a purpose contrary to the discourse of these methods. The literature foundations of this purpose were examined in the Post-Modern marketing section and the subject was deepened in the discussion and conclusion section.

In the literature review of this study, firstly post-modern economic understanding and then postmodern marketing and consumption issues were reviewed. Then, in order to establish links between these two topics, a discussion section was created in which the two topics were evaluated together. Finally, in the conclusion section, a set of thoughts created with a critical approach to marketing, which is the context of this study, is presented.

POST-MODERN ECONOMY

When human history is examined, it is seen that there are more effective forces in determining the social structure in each period. The transformation of these forces throughout history is explained as the transition from religion to science and from science to consumption (Kvale, 2003: 579-603). When examined historically, it is noteworthy that consumption is expressed as a determining factor, while even the periods in which Fordist production was seen and mass production created a transformation in economic history are not included in this ranking. In fact, the production focus seen in the Modern Period was a production process supported by scientific developments and engineering, but it was evaluated together with the science element in Kvale's approach. However, as a result of consumption being the fundamental element in the economy, this element has become a single factor and the main determinant.

In the Modern Period, increasing supply was absorbed by demand. However, with a production level that could not be absorbed by demand, it was necessary to increase consumption, not production, in order to sustain the economic growth. So, in a way, consumption seen in the post-modern period is a creation (Karabıyık, 2023: 35). In this case, it is necessary to discuss the context in which consumption is created.

Liberal and Neo-Liberal approaches, which are the basic economic approaches of the Post-Modern period, monetized everything and made them an object of change of the market economy. In other words, everything that is monetized becomes an object of exchange in the market, and today almost everything is monetized and offered to the market. Today, the concept of product has gone beyond the limitation of physical objects and has expanded to stocks and derivative financial instruments. In addition, the production of financial instruments that grant the right to carbon emissions has become controversial (Hamzaçebi et al., 2015: 78). In this process, marketing also works to ensure that every object that is subject to change in the markets is in demand. Today, marketing is developing marketing policies even on the donation campaigns of non-profit organizations. When evaluated in this context, there is an intense relationship between marketing and post-modern economy and mass consumption culture. The order created by this relationship is not only a system that regulates markets, but actually a system that regulates societies (Polanyi, 2017:196). In this case, post-modern marketing practices, which are the most important tools of this system that regulates societies, need to be examined in terms of green marketing and sustainable marketing in accordance with the context of this research.

POST-MODERN MARKETING AND CONSUMPTION

General Framework of Post-Modern Marketing and Consumption

Before the concept of post-modern marketing, it is necessary to mention the conditions of the Post-Modern Period. The economic understanding of the Modern Period was production-oriented and economic facts were discussed within the framework of the supply axiom (Gilboy, 2017: 121). In other words, although the economy was supply-driven, the main thing in this period was the issue of increasing supply. For this reason, Modern Period consumption took place in the context of rationality and functionality (Thomas, 1997: 57). It is not possible to talk about marketing activities in today's sense in markets operating under these conditions and understanding. Because in this period, consumption was conducted with need-oriented and functionality-based decisions and behaviors. However, as the absorption of supply became an important problem in the macroeconomic structure, a competition began among the suppliers and markets with higher consumption became a necessity for the sustainability of the system. This change has revealed post-modern consumer behavior and post-modern marketing (Polanyi, 2017: 85).

Although it is not possible to determine a specific date for the beginning of the Post-Modern Era, according to the common view in the literature, the Post-Modern Era began in the 1940s (Williams, 1989). After this date, consumption took its place at the center of the economy and brought it to the mass consumption economy. At the same time, it has created a social structure by affecting the sociological and anthropological structure. For example, according to Veblen (1994: 55), consumption standards are the most important component of living in the city in the Post-Modern Era. The discourse and practices of marketing are of great importance as a shaping force of society in the process of the social structure becoming more consumption-intensive. At this point, it is necessary to start examining the field of post-modern marketing and consumer behavior.

After consumption became a determinant in the social structure, consumer decisions and behaviors began to be examined in more detail and the characteristics of consumption decisions and behaviors began to be determined. In this context, the basic characteristics of the post-modern consumer

have been identified as being active, pleasure seeking, shopping-oriented, communicative, and activist (Thomas, 1997: 56-57). In addition, as a result of consumption reaching a structure that is integrated with the social structure and shapes it, post-modern consumption has gained symbolic and image-creating functions for consumers (Odabaşı, 2004: 58). In other words, for the post-modern consumer, consumption has gone far beyond the context of satisfying needs. Nowadays, consumers create an identity with brands and products and position themselves in society by turning this self into an image. This change also explains the diversification of post-modern marketing methods more than ever before in the history of marketing. Because marketing methods are needed according to the consumer's lifestyle, reference group, beliefs and similar characteristics. Ignoring the criticisms made on this subject in the marketing literature, it is even discussed how many post-modern marketing methods there are today, and a specific number cannot be determined. The main reason for this situation is that marketing methods are needed as many as the number of consumer groups that can create effective demand in the social structure. Because each group has a different characteristic from other people in the society due to its structure, it needs a marketing method suitable for this characteristic differentiation and creates its own market. Marketing experts also determine a niche market for each group that has reached a sufficient size to be a target market and develop a special marketing approach for this group. From the perspective of marketing literature and especially its discourse, the development of marketing theory and practice takes place in this way.

While economic growth increased rapidly as predicted by the dominant economic approach in the Post-modern Era, important problems such as natural resource and environmental pollution have emerged in reality. These problems become more important, especially in periods called crises of capitalism (Durmuş, 2013). These discussions extend to many areas such as income distribution justice, use of resources, political pressures, wars, environmental pollution and global warming. However, the literature review was continued with a focus on sustainable marketing, which is the subject of this study.

Marketing Side of Sustainability

The concept of sustainability is brought to the literature by mentioning it in the Brundtland Report and is defined as satisfying the needs of today's generations in a way that does not prevent future generations from satisfying their needs (WCED, 1987: 24). In a different definition, sustainability is evaluated in a broader framework and defined as a future vision, tool sets and road map that consider ethical and moral values for sustainable growth (Munier, 2005). In the 21st century, environmental pollution, global warming, climate changes and natural resources problems have become one of the intensively discussed topics (Kumar, Rahman & Kazmi, 2013: 601). However, since it is not possible to conduct these discussions in a general framework, branches of science have turned to sustainability research in their own fields. Marketing has also developed sustainable marketing methods by doing research in this context and positioned it with the concept of sustainable marketing under post-modern marketing methods.

Sustainable marketing, like other marketing methods, is a marketing method developed on strategic marketing and marketing mix approaches and integrated with market segmentation and target market applications (Slater & Olson, 2001: 1056). The development of this process took place as ecological marketing, green marketing, greener marketing, sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing (Seuring and Muller, 2008). While this is the development of sustainable marketing in terms of marketing theory, concepts such as green marketing and ecological marketing are used as sub-marketing methods in today's practice (Kaya, 2010: 335). This theory-practice differentiation does not directly constitute the research subject of this study. However, it should be noted that this is not a contradiction. Because it is the natural application of the marketing practices process for marketing to turn to a more specific segmentation in order to develop an accurate and deep marketing communication

with consumers in the market segmentation and target market processes.

Ecological marketing, the first stage of sustainable marketing, started with the emergence of consumers' ecological concerns and formed the basis of sustainable marketing. In this marketing method, brands were introduced to the eco-friendly marketing approach and formed the basis of today's sustainability marketing. For this reason, the ecological marketing period consists mostly of a communication process aimed at understanding consumers' expectations and concerns.

Despite theoretical discussions, in practice there has been no real concentration on environmental pollution, air pollution, global warming and similar issues in the context of sustainability. This situation changed in the 1980s, and in line with the demand from consumers, ecological marketing moved to the next level and became green marketing (Menon & Menon, 1997; Peattie & Crane, 2005). Desire, interest and awareness to produce green products started with the green marketing era. However, in the green marketing period, there are no clear limitations, legal rules and standards in the conceptual framework and limitations of the green product. In this process, brands were operating in the market by creating their own green standards in line with the demands of the consumers they interacted with. However, with Charter's greener marketing concept in 1992, standard uncertainties in green marketing ended. Thus, the social, environmental, cultural and legal standards of activities subject to green marketing have become more specific. For example, with eco-labeling applications, the standards for businesses to receive these labels are determined, and products that meet these standards at all stages are rewarded with this label, in a way (Başaran Alagöz, 2007). In fact, after this period, the concept of green marketing was replaced by the concept of greener marketing, and after this period, the concept expressed as green marketing was actually used to mean the concept of greener marketing. Because after a greener marketing concept with defined standards, there is no need for the old concept of green marketing, whose standards are unclear.

After green marketing, there was a return to the main purpose of this process and a transition to the concepts of sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing. In this period, long-term customer relations were also integrated with the concept of sustainability. Developments in this period should be understood as the period in which sustainable marketing and sustainability marketing concepts became compatible with post-modern consumer concepts. Because consumers, who have an interactive interaction with brands, also need to be involved in sustainability marketing and participate in making sense of this process. For this reason, sustainability marketing is a process in which green marketing practices, the conditions of which have been determined, are brought to a change with the participation of more socialization. Thus, at this point today, sustainability marketing has gained a customer relations context, and this context has become a marketing method developed in three dimensions: environmental, social and economic (Sun, Garrett, Phau, & Zheng, 2020).

Up to this point, the marketing side of the concept of sustainability has been examined. However, at the final point of this process, considering the developments in the general framework, it has been seen that the participation of consumers is a necessity, and the participation of consumers in sustainability marketing has also been observed. For this reason, in order to understand and interpret sustainability marketing correctly, changes on the consumer side of the process must also be considered.

The Consumer Side of Sustainability

As a result of economic and social changes, actors in these structures have begun to have environmental sustainability concerns. In terms of marketing, these actors consist of two parties: suppliers and demanders. In terms of marketing literature, the environmental concerns of the suppliers - that is, the sellers -, the measures taken and the changes in the field of marketing have been examined up to this point. In order to evaluate this concern correctly, it is necessary to examine how the

developments are interpreted by consumers.

To understand how consumers interpret sustainability marketing, it is necessary to understand what, how and how much the post-modern consumer wants to consume. In other words, the consumption understanding of the post-modern consumer needs to be understood. For this reason, the characteristics of the post-modern consumer are examined in this section.

It should be noted that today, consumption is an important factor that must be taken into account in order to understand the sociological structure. For example, sociologists such as Baudrillard, Veblen and Kvale explain city life in terms of consumption opportunities and conditions (Karabıyık, Elgün: 2022: 234). To give an example from practice, in China, the transition to the nuclear family type and migration to cities are expressed as a search for a higher standard of living and actually point to cities that are the centers of consumption (Abundaneyimu & Hu, 2019).

In the general framework of post-modern marketing and consumption section, it is mentioned that post-modern consumer characteristics are identified as being active, pleasure seeking, shopping-oriented, communicative, and activist, symbolic and image creator (Thomas, 1997: 56-57; Odabaşı, 2004: 58). In addition, in different studies, the post-modern consumer features hyper-reality, fragmentation, reversal of production and consumption, decentered subject, and paradoxical juxtaposition of opposites (Firat & Vankatesh, 1993). First of all, it is necessary to mention the practical reflections of these features. Contrary to the rational and functional understanding of consumption in the modern period, consumption in the post-modern period has turned into a much more complex structure as it has become a part of the social structure. When these features are examined, all of them show that consumers use them as a means of developing a social relationship with brands, interacting and positioning themselves in the social structure. As a result, it can be seen that in the Post-Modern Period, consumption has become an actor within the social structure, separating itself from the axiom of need. As an actor in the social structure, consumption has become an inevitable action for consumers. Because it was a functional action to satisfy needs for modern consumption and there had to be a need for consumption to occur. Moreover, since this need was realized through functional consumption, it had a limited structure. However, once consumption becomes a part of the social structure, it will increase unstopably. Because today, wherever people socialize, there is a consumption, and due to its nature, human socialization never stops. In addition, the explosion of social interactions through tools such as social media ultimately increases consumption rapidly. In fact, the consumer society is parallel to the socialization of consumption and the mass consumption society is parallel to the explosion of social interaction that takes place over the internet.

While these developments were taking place on the consumption side, a sustainability approach emerged, first in the macroeconomic field and then spreading to other areas of the economy. At the same time, statistical growth of the economy became a principle in this period. When examined in practice, it is natural that the consumption explosion and the obsession with a statistically growing economy give rise to sustainability debates. Because in this period, developments in production technologies increased production and a consumer base was created that competed to absorb this production and wanted to consume unlimitedly. Although this structure is positive in terms of producers, consumers and economic approaches, this situation creates a problem for nature on the basis of sustainability. For this reason, a sustainability approach has been developed for each area of the economy. However, the essence of this approach also needs to be questioned, and the subject of this study is to question the essence of the sustainability approach in marketing. This critical approach was examined in the discussion and conclusion section of this study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Regarding economic sustainability, the affirmation of unlimited production, unlimited consumption and statistically increasing economic data seems to be a clear reality. These assumptions are called a text in this study. Because instead of discussing these dogmas, which are far from causality and reality, there are actually efforts to harmonize realities with these dogmas through sustainability. However, nature seems to prevent this situation. In other words, the aim is to overcome the obstacle of nature in order to continue growing economies through unlimited production and consumption, which is essentially natural. In this study, the issue of sustainability is discussed from a marketing perspective within the framework of this argument. In other words, this study discusses what the concept of sustainable marketing essentially focuses on sustainability.

There is a clear difference between the practice of the post-modern consumption period, which is the period in which sustainable marketing emerged and matured, and the discourse of sustainable marketing. Although sustainable marketing seems to be a marketing method developed with the focus on protecting natural resources and the environment, it is noteworthy that in practice it has developed together with the mass consumption economy. When evaluated in this context, sustainability marketing should be expected to develop in a critical manner to the current economic structure. However, on the contrary, sustainability marketing aims to increase consumption. In other words, there is actually no giving up on increasing consumption. Instead, there is a motivation to protect the increase in consumption. As a matter of fact, there are definitions of sustainability marketing that clearly express this situation. For example, according to Peattie (2001) and Dam and Apeldoorn (1996), the main concern of sustainable marketing is macroeconomic growth. In this context, sustainable marketing should be defined as supportive of sustainable economic development. When viewed from the perspective of marketing practices, it can be seen that marketing aims to increase consumption in line with macroeconomic expectations. This situation shows that it is only aimed at increasing economic data for a longer period of time rather than protecting nature. In other words, in terms of sustainable marketing, the answer to the question "what is sustainable" is not the environment, but economic expectations. This shows that marketing's use of the concept of sustainability as a post-modern marketing tool imposes an image on brands. In other words, it consists of creating an image for the consumer of brands with sustainable marketing practices. This adds importance to consumers' views on what is actually sustainable.

When examined from the consumer's perspective, it is seen that consumers and brands have a common opinion in terms of sustainability, with exceptions. Because, in parallel with this understanding, the post-modern consumer wants to consume unlimitedly. Moreover, in order to show a critical attitude towards this situation, consumption must be separated from its social functions. However, instead of this separation, they prefer to consume products developed based on sustainable marketing in order to create a social image that they care about nature. In other words, they do not choose not to consume. Continuity of consumption is essential. For example, automobiles that use recycled materials are evaluated within the framework of sustainable marketing. However, these cars still have models with high engine power and are preferred. Even in brands that are in the supercars class and produced only for faster use, the use of materials obtained from recycling is explained as sustainability, and consumers accept this situation. Or, in relation to sustainability, unlike clothing brands that employ child labor, there are brands that create a marketing image based on the image that they do not employ child labor. However, even a marketing strategy based on not employing child labor requires the existence of another brand that employs child labor. In other words, for sustainable marketing to become an image, it requires the existence of a structure that does not comply with ethical and moral rules. In this context, the situation that should be the case for a brand that produces without using child labor is turned into an image. This image means profit and positioning at a higher price.

The findings identified in this study show that sustainability marketing is also positioned with a marketing strategy. This positioned point is contrary to the essence of sustainability, but only aims at macroeconomic growth.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

This study examined sustainability within the limitations of sustainability marketing and criticized this post-modern marketing method based on the difference between discourse and reality. In this context, it is not possible to claim that the concept of sustainability does not reduce the damage to nature at all. However, there are problems in terms of the aim of reducing this harm, and it has been argued that this understanding itself is not sustainable. In addition, more efficient production methods developed in terms of engineering in production methods or green approaches developed in other areas of the economy such as green business, green supply chain, green packaging, green purchasing and similar (Ögüt, Ekinçi & Gökçe, 2023: 261) are not included in the scope of this study.

In this study, the concept of sustainability marketing is criticized and the importance of ensuring harmony between discourse and reality is pointed out. It is also seen that this incompatibility extends to many areas of marketing. For example, in the marketing of derivative papers developed to distribute risk within the framework of neo-liberal economy, what the risk actually is and how it is introduced while marketing is a similar topic of discussion (Karabıyık, 2019). In other words, the subject that this study examines with a critical approach is the conscious difference created between discourse and reality. On the other hand, there are approaches to this discourse-reality harmony in the marketing literature. These approaches include the critical marketing approach and demarketing as an application of it, as well as approaches focused on not to consume. In these approaches, the context of not consuming may be not consuming due to the lack of quality of the products, or it may be a tendency not to consume due to environmental concerns. However, it is not possible to talk about a theoretical and practical active presence in these fields. However, since it is compatible with the approach of this study, deepening the studies and literature in these areas constitute the recommendations of this study. Studies on minimalism and post-materialism, which support these ideas and should be used in the process of deepening, also constitute the recommendations of this study.

Ethical Statement

There is not ethical statement.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval is not required since the study is a theoretical discussion.

Author Contributions

Research Design Author 1 (%40) – Author 2 (%60)

Data Collecting Author 1 (%50) – Author 2 (%50)

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Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)

Sustainable Development Goals: 12 Responsible Production and Consumption

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