

Marketing and Societal Harm: The Role of Marketing Capture

Abstract:

Using a theory building from cases approach we explore the opioid, fossil fuels, ultra-processed foods, social media, and sub-prime lending industries and develop a theory of marketing capture. The literature on negative events in marketing is surprisingly silent regarding either theoretical or practical guidance to assess when and how marketing strategies may contribute to societal harm. There is a need for a new lens to inform how to ensure established marketing strategies do not damage societal welfare. We show that marketing capture operates through companies' marketing strategies to capture not just regulatory authorities, but also the media, institutional and certifying bodies, industry stakeholders, and even society more broadly, to behave in ways that align with the companies' commercial interests. Thus, firms are given more latitude not only to pursue their revenue objectives in a relatively unrestricted fashion, but also to obfuscate their role in societal harms. The novel theoretical lens we introduce allows us to examine the dark side of traditional marketing strategies. The marketing capture model offers critical managerial and regulatory foresight regarding the likelihood of marketing strategies leading to societal harms.