Public Policy Issues and Technoethics in Marketing Research in the Digital Age

Pratap Chandra Mandal, Indian Institute of Management, Shillong, India

ABSTRACT

Companies collect customer information in marketing research to understand customers and generate customer insights. Various public policy and ethical issues are associated with the process. The issues include intrusions on consumer privacy; misuse, misinterpretation, and misrepresentation of research findings; ethical and social dilemma in the collection of customer information; and ethical dilemma in generating customer insights through neuromarketing and its applications. In this digital age, it is easier to invade consumer privacy. Companies abide by the various laws and regulations enforced to protect customers and adopt a number of initiatives to convince their customers. Understanding of the various public policy and ethical issues and addressing such issues by adopting proper initiatives will help companies convince customers, build effective customer relationships, and achieve business excellence. The understanding might also help policymakers to appreciate the customer requirements and devise policies, rules, and regulations accordingly.

KEYWORDS

Consumer Privacy, Customer Information, Customer Insights, Ethical Dilemma, Neuromarketing, Security

1. INTRODUCTION

Good products and marketing programs begin with relevant information about customers. Apart from information about customers, companies also require information about competitors, resellers, and other actors and marketplace forces (Tajudeen, Jaafar, & Sulaiman, 2016). Marketers use the information to gain powerful customer and market insights. Companies require to have a proper marketing research process in place to collect customer information and generate customer insights (Malhotra & Dash, 2016). Collection of information in marketing research and generation of customer insights may have a number of issues. Companies require to be aware about the various public policy issues and ethical concerns related to marketing research (Bakardjieva & Kimmel, 2017). Most of the activities related to marketing research benefit both the sponsoring company and its customers. However, both researchers and companies may misuse research findings for their own selfish interests. The misuse of marketing research can harm or annoy customers. It may affect the perceptions of customers towards companies and may also affect relationships of customers with companies (Adediran, 2012). Two of the most important concerns in public policy issues and ethics in marketing research relate to intrusions on consumer privacy and the misuse of research findings (Mandal, 2018). In this digital age, it is difficult to maintain consumer privacy. Individuals share

a lot of information online which might be accessed by companies. Public policy issues and ethics also relate to the manner in which customer information is used (Mandal, 2019a). These issues are of concern because not only customers but also the society at large gets affected. The study discusses about the various public policy issues and ethics related to collection of customer information in marketing research. Both researchers and companies should be aware about such issues while conducting marketing research.

The importance of public policy issues and ethics regarding collection of customer information in marketing research and generation of customer insights cannot be overemphasized. So, it is required to study the roles of public policy and ethics in marketing research and in gaining customer insights. This requires an in-depth study about the issues. However, few studies have tried to address this issue. The study aims to address this research gap.

The objective of the study is to conduct a qualitative and conceptual study of the various public policy and ethical issues related to the collection of customer information in marketing research and generation of customer insights.

The methodology adopted is the qualitative and conceptual analysis of the literature related to public policy and ethical issues regarding collection of customer information in marketing research and generation of customer insights. The study did not collect primary data and did not conduct an empirical analysis. Also, the study was conducted mainly in the context of the United States.

The novelty and the contributions of the study lie in the fact that a thorough conceptual analysis of the literature on public policy and ethical issues related to collection of customer information in marketing research and generation of customer insights is done. Researchers and company managers will be able to appreciate what all aspects they need to keep in mind while approaching customers for collection of information. They should be ethical in all their dealings with customers so that the sentiments of customers are not hurt. The study might help policymakers to understand the actual requirements of customers. Such insights might help them to formulate the policies, rules, and regulations better.

The study is structured as follows.

Section 2 discusses about the intrusions on consumer privacy in the digital age. Marketing research findings may be misused, misinterpreted, and misrepresented and this issue is discussed in section 3. Section 4 focuses on the ethics involved in collection of customer information while section 5 focuses on the ethical and social dilemma related to customer information. Neuromarketing is a recent trend which is applied to understand consumer psychology. Neuromarketing, its applications, and the ethical dilemma associated with it are discussed in section 6. Section 7 discusses about the responsibilities of marketers and the initiatives adopted by companies to protect customers. Section 8 discusses the salient points of the study with sub-sections 8.1 and 8.2 focusing on the theoretical and managerial implications of the study respectively. Section 9 concludes the study with sub-sections 9.1 and 9.2 focusing on the limitations of the study and avenues of future research respectively.

2. INTRUSIONS ON CONSUMER PRIVACY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Consumers are positive about marketing research and many consumers feel that it serves a useful purpose. Consumers also enjoy being interviewed and giving their opinions (Dauxert, 2019). However, some respondents strongly resent or even mistrust marketing research. They are skeptical about the objectives of collecting information about customers. They worry that companies build customer databases based on the information collected. The databases contain personal and sensitive information about customers. Based on the stored information, individuals fear that researchers might use sophisticated techniques to understand the deepest feelings, track internet and mobile device usage, understand the buying behavior of customers, and then apply the knowledge to influence customers. A recent survey showed that more than 90 percent of Americans feel that they have lost control over the collection and usage of their personal information. Companies collect their personal data and

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