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# Constructions of marketing work: a critical Review

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ways in which marketing scholarship has engaged with the concept of marketing work. It seeks to demonstrate, through a critical review of the literature, that marketing research has largely kept its focus away from the mundane world of the practitioner and this has led to significant weaknesses in our understanding of what actually constitutes marketing work, and therefore, also, to confused conceptualisations of marketing. Centrally, the paper adopts Gummesson's distinction between part-time and full-time marketers as a potentially helpful lens through which to approach the leaky boundaries of daily marketing work, using it to examine scholarly responses to the impact of co-creation, social media, datafication, artificial intelligence, and gender on marketing work.

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There is a spectre haunting the realm of marketing scholarship – the spectre of work, practice, the job, marketing as it is actually performed. What do marketers actually do with their day? What tasks are they most concerned with? What do they talk with each other about in meetings? And how can we even tell if someone *is* a marketer? The consideration of such matters should, surely, be paramount in a discipline that is grounded in the scholarly examination of the practices of exchange. Yet, as we all know, there exists a long-established recognition of the great difference between what marketing scholars write about the work of marketing and what professional workers do when they are ‘marketing’. The theory-practice divide in marketing has been described as ‘growing wider rather than narrower’ (Baker, 2001, p. 25), a ‘chasm’ (McCole, 2004, p. 531), ‘an alarming and growing gap’ (Reibstein et al., 2009, p. 1), a reflection of the fact that ‘academic researchers hold the pursuit of knowledge as their primary goal, while practitioners are mainly interested in practical tools and solutions to specific problems that they face’ (Brennan & Ankers, 2004, p. 518), and the result of a ‘false dichotomy between the roles and perspectives of academics and practitioners’ (Wieland et al., 2021, p. 253). While there are complex (and disputed) reasons for the divide (see, for example, Lee & Greenley, 2010; Lilien, 2011; Setkute & Dibb, 2025), and while it is also the case that the ‘theory-practice’ divide is by no means restricted to the discipline of marketing (Arteaga et al., 2024), nevertheless the difference between what professional marketers do and what marketing

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scholars (and educators) concern themselves with is nowhere more obvious than in the consideration of what constitutes *marketing work*.

A simple example of this can be found in the curious paucity of scholarly work on the concept of the 'marketing plan'. The construction of the marketing plan is the activity that most undergraduates inducted into the practice of marketing are taught to focus their efforts on. It is also the activity that lies at the centre of the most popular marketing textbooks and how-to guides. Its elements provide the core organisational structure of Kotler et al. (2019) and Kotler et al. (2024), the two behemoths of marketing education over the past fifty years. As the former puts it, 'marketing managers must be able to manage the effective design and implementation of a customer-focused marketing plan for the organisation' (Kotler et al., 2019, p. 35). Clearly, the marketing plan is advanced in these highly prestigious instructional foundations to the professional field as a fundamental part of the marketer's work. Yet, the *scholarly* literature on the marketing plan is comparatively tiny, given this apparently central role (and notwithstanding the sterling work of R. Brooksbank, 1991; R. W. Brooksbank, 1990; Carson & Cromie, 1989; Cousins, 1990; Greenley, 1982, 1986; M. McDonald, 2006; M. H. B. McDonald, 1989, 1992; Slotegraaf & Dickson, 2004; Whalen & Boush, 2014). There is very little discussion of it as an artefact, as a systematisation of marketing work, as an evidenced process of marketing practice, or even as a professional tool. Does this mean that marketing scholarship largely ignores the reality of marketing work? Or does it mean that it has a very different conception (or conceptions) of what constitutes marketing work?

The reality is that there are many sites of marketing work conceptualisation. Understandings of what constitutes marketing work are created within organisations that employ marketing and or marketing staff (as well as those who do not); within professional associations of marketers (such as the American Marketing Association, or the UK's Chartered Institute of Marketing, as well as more specialised associations such as the UK's Institute of Practitioners in Advertising); within secondary and tertiary/higher education programmes and courses devoted to marketing or containing marketing components, within the trade press (such as the UK's *Marketing Week*, and *Advertising Age* in the US); within the body of writing that is produced by practising marketers (or 'marketing gurus') and aimed at those in need of performing their own marketing or improving and extending their own marketing skills; and finally within the rich perceptions of non-marketing stakeholders across society (including consumers, journalists, lawmakers, and NGO workers) who can all have quite definite opinions of what exactly it is that marketers do. The scholarly literature stands in addition to all of these sources for the conceptualisation of marketing work. It has a clear influence on some of them (secondary and tertiary education programmes and course content and the related textbook market, for example), but a somewhat less clear impact on others. This questionable, tenuous nature of the influence that marketing scholarship on marketing work might have on the lived experience of those employed as marketing workers is, of course, a facet of the often discussed divide between marketing theory and practice (B. Ardley, 2008; Baker, 2001; Brennan, 2004; Brennan & Ankers, 2004; Crespín-Mazet & Ingemansson-Havenvid, 2021; Crosier, 2004; Hill et al., 2007; Lee & Greenley, 2010; Ottesen & Grønhaug, 2004; Rowley, 2012; Wieland et al., 2021). Allied to this divide (or the perception of this divide) is the possibly shifting nature of marketing's power in the firm and the C-suite (Homburg et al., 2015; Klaus et al., 2014; Verhoef & Leeflang, 2009; Nath & Mahajan,

2017) which might indicate that marketing work is not always perceived as legitimate work (Park et al., 2012). Indeed, a common way to refer to the marketing team in UK business is as ‘the colouring-in department’ (Camp & Thomson, 2018; Rogers, 2017). Marketing work, then, is something that both marketing scholars and organisational elements would seem to have difficulties understanding and engaging with. This is something that needs to be closely interrogated as we examine academic engagement with marketing work. As Svensson (2019) cogently argues, ‘if we are interested in the ways marketing work *works*, it is necessary to explore how marketing words, ideas, and deeds appear in the everyday, mundane work in and in-between organizations’ (p. 162). Yet, the vast majority of marketing scholarship does not engage with this experience of marketing work. It is, as Svensson puts it, ‘deodorized’ of the messy, day-to-day practice of what occurs in working marketing departments. Is this because, perhaps, actual marketing work has always resisted easy definition and systematization? If it is messy, smelly, polymorphic, and shape-shifting – then no wonder the public are suspicious of it and no wonder, then, that many scholars, in thrall to the neat and the categorizable, the quantifiable and pinnable, might find it more convenient to construct an entire fantasy world of clean, deodorised, and acronym-laden frameworks to discuss and compare. To act ‘as if’ (Vaihinger, 2021) what they are talking about is the real work of marketing.

More than twenty years ago, Baker (2001) argued that the reason for the strong discontinuity between what professional marketers do and what marketing scholars teach and write about is that the latter are ‘not really interested in’ the practice of marketing. Marketing is simply a ‘convenient conduit for their own theoretical interests’ (p. 25) and the marketing groups and departments that teach and research at universities are populated predominantly by those from the ‘core disciplines such as economics, psychology and sociology on which marketing is based’. Naturally, the attention and interests of such scholars would be moulded by their own intellectual backgrounds rather than the distant exigencies of the marketing practitioner. Yet, whether this characterisation of marketing academics holds water or not, it is certainly the case that those teaching and researching marketing in universities are embedded within specific networks of power relationships that are quite different to those experienced by most *marketing practitioners*. The incentives for promotion, the metrics for impact, the strategies that are rewarded by increased social capital, the Key Performance Indicators that work is measured with – it might well be argued that marketing academics and marketing professionals share almost nothing in these realms.

Yet at the same time, university scholars, whatever their ostensible department and disciplinary allegiance, have been undergoing a transformation into marketing practitioners in a manner akin to the proverbial slowly boiled frog. The marketisation of higher education, as Fairclough (1993) points out, has led to the ‘colonizing spread of promotional discourse’ (p. 142) within universities. This means that not only are institutions of higher education expected to operate ‘as if they were ordinary businesses competing to sell their products to consumers’ (p. 143), but academic staff themselves are increasingly expected to function as marketers of their units, programmes and employers (Cambra-Fierro & Cambra-Berdún, 2008; Karaferye, 2019; Papagiannidis, 2013; Poole & Ewan, 2010; Richardson & Lemoine, 2015; Swenddal et al., 2018). Alongside this, scholarship has always involved a significant degree of promotion – publication of research, the writing of textbooks, appearances at conferences can all be framed as part of the ‘dissemination

of knowledge', but they can equally be framed as promotional gambits designed to increase social capital within a profession (or across professional and institutional divides), advance particular research agendas (and research groups) at the expense of others, and foster certain individual or group understandings over others. Our work as marketing academics, therefore, naturally involves us not only marketing our institutions and programmes but also ourselves as researchers and teachers and the various understandings and interpretations with which we align ourselves. One of the most significant of those understandings and interpretations for marketing academics is that of *marketing work* – for it, naturally, cuts across so much of what we do. Yet, as noted above, marketing work is a messy thing to deal with and the ways in which we deodorise it, bound it, and characterise it, and *market* it, can tell us much about the relationship between our discipline and our profession(s).

Finally, constructions of marketing work (by scholars, educators, practitioners, professional associations, and industry journalists) are reflections of underlying power structures that are defended, reproduced and extended via such constructions (see B. Ardley, 2011; B. C. Ardley & Quinn, 2014; Fougère & Skålén, 2013; Kasabov, 2004; Özgün et al., 2017; Skålén et al., 2006; Tadjewski, 2006). The ways we talk about marketing work are driven by our needs to secure and enhance our positions within the networks and institutions that we are embedded within. Scholars and practitioners, as noted above, are embedded in quite different power structures and have quite different 'professional identities' to 'accomplish' (to adapt Hackley, 2001, p. 4), so that even though we use much of the same language and, ostensibly, talk about the same things our discourses serve quite different power structures and interests and therefore convey quite different understandings of what marketing work is. Accordingly, this paper seeks to investigate the variety of understandings of marketing work, as well as the tensions between the deodorised and the messy (the raw and the cooked, perhaps) that manifest in these understandings. To start, it makes sense to examine the ways in which the commonly used definitions of marketing outline what might be expected from the practical implementation of the marketing process. The paper will then move on to a discussion of the part-time and full-time marketer, a crucial point of differentiation that will be connected to considerations of co-creation in marketing work and the significant changes brought to marketing work by the digitalisation of our lives as workers and consumers, changing distinctions between strategic and tactical areas of work, and the gendering of marketing work.

## The definition(s) and scope of marketing work

The American Marketing Association's definition of marketing serves as the gold standard for both the discipline and the profession because it represents a frequently reviewed and revised formulation that ostensibly takes into account the voices of marketing practitioners as well as scholars, guided as it is 'by a committee whose members represent a cross-section of the marketing industry' (AMA, 2008). The current (AMA, 2024) definition was announced at the end of 2007 and re-approved in 2017. It is a revision of the 2004 definition that had provoked a significant amount of debate (Gundlach & Wilkie, 2009; Ringold & Weitz, 2007) and appears to have generally served the AMA well since then. Accordingly, the AMA defines marketing as 'the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for

customers, clients, partners, and society at large' (AMA, 2024). From the perspective of how this describes marketing work it might be fair to say that it is quite broad in its terms. Certainly, the central focus here is that marketing work deals with offerings that have value for a wide range of internal and external stakeholders. The four principal verbs in the formulation seem to delineate the work of marketing as consisting of creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging – but as these verbs are describing work done in order to output 'offerings' it would seem important to have a succinct gloss of what this concept is meant to convey. Yet, this is not easy to find. Indeed, if one scans through Ringold and Weitz's (2007) survey of definitions of marketing we can see that the word 'offering' has only been used consistently by Kotler in his various formulations since the mid-1970s onwards. Even there, though, the word is used as a verb rather than a noun and is usually used alongside two other verbs that feature in the AMA definition, constructing some variation of the phrase, 'creating, offering, and exchanging products and services' (see Ringold & Weitz, 2007, pp. 256–8). The nominalising of 'offering' in the 2007 AMA definition is an important signal in regards to the nature of marketing work as conceived by the AMA. Perhaps the closest analogue to the way in which 'offering' is used here is the 'value proposition' in the Service-Dominant logic tradition (and one notes that the AMA definition qualifies its use of 'offerings' with the proviso that they 'have value') (Corvellec & Hultman, 2014; Frow & Payne, 2011; Kowalkowski, 2011; Vargo & Lusch, 2004; Vargo et al., 2017). An offering is a proposition, after all – so, the work of the marketer revolves around the construction of a value 'package' that can be proposed to stakeholders. The planning behind that proposal (regarding the exact form that it will take), its communication to the targeted stakeholders, and the management of the delivery that leads to final value exchange are, consequently, the principal areas of marketing work according to the AMA.

In contrast to the AMA definition, the UK's Chartered Institute of Marketing grounds their formulation in a prioritisation of marketing work as *management* work: 'marketing is the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably' (CIM, 2023). Certainly, the wording places clear emphasis on market and customer research as central features of marketing work, and though 'satisfying' does a great deal of heavy-lifting it is also clearly locked into the *continuing* work of monitoring customer experience after purchase and so further strengthens the focus on research. The AMA and CIM definitions betray startlingly different conceptions of marketing work. The verbs they use to describe that work have little overlap; identifying, anticipating and satisfying" versus 'creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging'. Given this quite fundamental difference in understanding between two national professional associations, it would seem quite sensible to look to research that investigates what practitioners themselves say they do in their day-to-day employment.

Dibb et al. (2014) seek to establish 'the scope of marketing practice' (p. 380) through a mixed methods exploration of training discourse around the nature of marketing (i.e. textbooks), how academics speak about marketing practice, how job adverts for marketing practitioners describe the skills and knowledge they are searching for, and how marketing practitioners themselves describe the work they do. The authors point out that while scholars have examined 'marketing's broader role and contribution within the organisation' and 'the prevalence of particular marketing practices' there has been very little investigation into 'the specific actions and activities which comprise marketing

practice' (p. 381). They found that all of their sources reflected 'the centrality of customers to marketing practice' (p. 395) and that there were significant common understandings regarding the roles played by 'stakeholder and relationship marketing, customer analysis, marketing-mix management, and marketing planning' (p. 395). At the same time, Dibb et al.'s analysis highlighted that understandings and agreement became far less clear and consistent 'when themes are integrated into broader categories of practice, with evidence that activities are parcelled and prioritized in different ways by the different sources' (Dibb et al., 2014, p. 395).

Gross and Laamanen (2018) have engaged with the issue of the scope of marketing practice by researching practitioners' 'knowledge constructs'. They argue that exploring 'professional knowing' is a 'means of understanding the practical engagement in marketing work which reflects upon the ideological impact of practice in defining the marketing discipline' (p. 1173). Echoing some of the congruence that Dibb et al.'s earlier study uncovered, Gross and Laamanen (2018) find that 'that practitioners' professional knowledge is a complex blend of the elements of practice within knowledge constructs [... that...] are highly adapted in the everyday context of marketing work, yet many also come across as versions of textbook theories' (ibid.). There is some clear influence of 'textbook' marketing concepts in the practice discourse of Gross and Laamanen's (2018) respondents (value propositions, differentiation, market research, the marketing plan, etc.) but the ways in which these concepts end up being understood and instantiated in practice demonstrates that 'knowledge does not flow directly from ideology but hinges on local recognition, sensemaking and contextual relevance' (p. 1188).

A similar perspective informs Challagalla et al. (2014) exploration of what they term 'marketing doctrine'. The authors interviewed partners in a global professional services firm practised in 'implementing marketing doctrine for *Fortune 500* clients' (p. 5), representatives of these clients, and a further broad sample of marketing executives. Their data showed that understandings of marketing and marketing practice were often strongly contingent, and expressed through 'firm-specific principles that uniquely reflect a firm's strategy and context rather than simply emulating other firms or theory' (p. 7).

The upshot of such research is to suggest that what is understood by marketing work (and therefore what *gets done* as marketing work) might be significantly different from one firm to another, as well as from one industry to another, and even from one region to another. While textbooks, university courses, and professional certifications might seek to outline the knowledge, skills and processes that the profession requires, actual marketing work might not always (or even largely) align with these versions of canonical agenda-setting. Hackley's (1999) study of 'tacit knowledge' in strategic marketers demonstrates that much marketing knowledge and expertise is not formally codified or communicated but rather exists as 'highly sophisticated, abstract, experientially-mediated' 'action schemata' (p. 724). Such a situation would seem to argue convincingly for the adoption of broadly ethnographic approaches in marketing research that seek to reliably engage with marketing as a profession (rather than an academic discipline). Following marketers around and observing what it is they are asked to do, what they end up actually doing, and what skills and processes they use to navigate that doing would seem to be the obvious answer. Yet, participant observation (and even action research), while used to a small extent in the market research of consumers, has played only a small role in the academic investigation of how marketing is performed (Ballantyne, 2004; Boote &



Mathews, 1999; Lee & Broderick, 2007; Oliver & Eales, 2008; Perry & Gummesson, 2004). Even if we restrict ourselves to interviewing those involved in marketing work, how do we reliably and accurately identify those employed to pursue such work? Should we focus on those who *manage* marketing workers (and who might reasonably be thought to have an overview of the tasks such workers are expected to perform), those who perform the actual 'grunt' work in marketing teams or marketing departments, or the large number of people in any organisation who have some component of what might be defined as marketing work in their job description (and who are generally not managed by marketing managers or trained in marketing per se)?

### The part-time marketer

All such questions are made even more complicated by the shifting, floating nature of the marketer role itself. Gummesson (1991) was the first to formally identify the role of the part-time marketer (PTM), someone who 'does not belong to the marketing or sales department' but nevertheless carries out 'marketing activities' (p. 60) – in other words does marketing work without being formally employed in the firm as a marketer. Gummesson (1991) argues that all employees are involved in either external or internal marketing activities that 'influence an organisation's customer relations directly or indirectly, irrespective of which organisational unit they belong to' (p. 72). So, for example, personnel in operations management or production departments perform marketing work when they maintain promised delivery times and interact with customers visiting 'the plant for inspection' (p. 67). Design and R&D staff are involved in marketing work when they seek to optimise the 'user-friendly operation' of a final product, while management personnel might design marketing strategies, negotiate 'major contracts' and entertain 'important visitors' (ibid.). The marketing department (if there is one), or those specifically hired for full-time marketing responsibilities (FTMs) are not necessarily directly involved in all or even most of this work, although they might well be advising and steering on some of it. Indeed, Gummesson (1991) notes that the more a firm realises the importance of the PTM, the more clear it will become that the marketing department should not be viewed as the 'apex of marketing activities' but rather as a 'supplement' to the overall marketing orientation of the organisation, 'providing overall strategies and resources' (p. 73).

It should be remarked that the establishment of the PTM concept can be interpreted as a form of 'land grab' by marketing academics seeking to further the scope of marketing's influence within (and without) the firm. If we argue that, in practice, a significant amount of marketing work is done by people outside of the marketing department, then this would naturally lead to an argument (or an implicit assumption) for increasing the reach of that marketing department, facilitating their control and management of those whose work has some form of marketing component. Such strategies of scope enhancement are not uncommon in marketing research – unease with them motivated critiques by Bartels (1974) and Luck (1974) of Kotler and Zaltman's (1971) social marketing concept, for example. And while there have certainly been voices warning 'of the dangers of over-extending the concept' (Brown, 1995, p. 6) of marketing, it remains a discourse strategy that serves scholarly and institutional power structures. At the same time, it can be argued that recognition of the PTM concept might potentially help to undercut existing power



structures in marketing research, education and management. If so many people without marketing training or significant (effective) oversight are actually in the business, for at least some of their work time, of doing marketing, then it calls into question the specialised nature of the work. We have, by now, probably all come across students at the postgraduate level who have, by their own description, ‘done some marketing’ in their jobs even though they have never taken a marketing course. Indeed, it is quite common for first-year undergraduate cohorts to include at least one or two influencers who have been doing successful influencer marketing for a couple of years before ever attending university. While the idea of the PTM can be used to argue, by marketing scholars, for greater power and wider scope for marketing managers it might also be used to argue for the opposite – the eventual withering away of the marketing management institution entirely. And, of course, one wonders just how many overworked marketing managers would welcome the prospect of suddenly being responsible for the government of a myriad of internal and external PTMs.

So, the concept of the part-time marketer is a vital one for any consideration of marketing work to wrestle with. If marketing work occurs at the direct or indirect interface of organisation and customer then it provides us with distinct challenges of scope if we are to effectively investigate it – if everyone is doing it, how can we tell when it is happening and what it consists of? Yet, the relevance of the PTM logic is increasing exponentially. Roles, and entire professions, that might expect to exist far away from marketing concerns (or at least be confident that the ‘marketing people will handle that’) are finding that more and more of their own time and attention is given over to such activities. So, as Vos et al. (2023) have shown, journalists are increasingly having to add a marketing function to their role because they ‘now work in an environment where they are expected to actively promote their news stories – and themselves – via social media’ (p. 763). As already noted, school and university teachers are also acting as PTMs, not just educators, but spokespeople for their institutions (Cambra-Fierro & Cambra-Berdún, 2008) and therefore central actors in impression management and the creation of customer relationships (Poole & Ewan, 2010). Doctors in certain speciality areas are taking increasingly proactive marketing roles beyond the usual internal and external marketing activities they might be involved with in the management of their practice (Atef et al., 2023; Joa & Park, 2021) and such medical practitioners even have articles in their own academic journals recommending effective content strategies for their social media posts (Klietz et al., 2020).

In brief, as realisation of the value of an attention to marketing suffuses across more and more professions, sectors and organisations, more and more people either elect to take on marketing work as part of their normal role or have marketing work forced upon them. While the literature displays some consideration of the reluctant consumer, usually from the perspective of examining why prospective buyers might be unwilling to adopt certain new types of offerings (Kolsaker et al., 2004; Popa Sărghie & Pracejus, 2023; Sheehan & Atkinson, 2012; Simpson, 2004; Wilska, 2002; Zinkhan & Carlson, 1995), there has been far less exploration of those who find themselves reluctantly positioned into marketing work (though see Johansen, 2005; Laing & McKee, 2001). Indeed, the existing scholarship on the PTM largely treats the extension of marketing work across organisational personnel as ethically unproblematic and a natural (desirable, even) consequence of either the successful adoption of a marketing-orientation or service-orientation. This is

an area in urgent need of investigation, however. Just as customers can become dissatisfied with being marketed to, so might employees grow unhappy with the increasing burden of taking on marketing work in addition to their other responsibilities. So, while some academics might welcome the chance to promote their institution on social media, others might balk at it being considered an expectation of their role.

Much PTM work comes down to various activities devoted to impression management. In the words of Harker (2004), the PTM is, after all, someone 'who has the ability to make an impression on the customer's judgement of the firm, regardless of the role in which the person is officially employed' (p. 663). And in current work environments, this impression management is often carried out on social media. Curating a social media profile, creating regular posts, attending to posted comments and questions, and generally managing engagement all become examples of marketing work when undertaken on behalf of a brand or company (or even an individual who is trying to market their own influence as a commodity). Such work, even when performed outside of a marketing frame, can be disproportionately onerous in terms of the time and attention it demands, leading to 'burnout' (Han, 2018) from the 'social media burden' (de Rutte et al., 2024) as well as leading to unhealthy blurring between the personal/private and professional domains (Bucher et al., 2013). When this work is part of a job description (whether explicitly described as a marketing role or not) such challenges are potentially increased via the broader expectations of worker 'performance'. However, as Hearn (2008) argues, the nature of self-branding online means that 'any meaningful distinction between notions of the self and capitalist processes of production and consumption' is eroded. The self-branding user of social media is engaged in marketing work in just as committed a fashion as their counterpart in a digital agency or brand 'marketeer' team (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Arriagada & Ibáñez, 2020).

## Consumers doing marketing work

One of the most significant aspects to the Part-Time Marketing work issue, though, is the part played by consumers. The florescence of online communities and social media platforms over the past thirty years, and then marketing's attempt to engage with the new opportunities that they represent, has meant that, inevitably, the bulk of part-time marketers are now consumers, involved (often unwittingly) in co-creation schemes with brands where they serve to amplify and resonate value propositions across the networks of their fellow consumers. This co-opting of consumers as marketing workers has, in some respects, commanded far more scholarly interest than the co-opting of non-marketing department personnel into part-time marketing roles. The 'co-creation of value' (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Vargo & Lusch, 2004) has served as a concept around which the co-opting of consumers as marketing workers can be normalised and framed as something unproblematic in terms of tensions around power balances, exploitation, and information asymmetry. Co-creation and co-production have largely been portrayed as dynamics that are inherent to the modern consumer relationship with brands, where it is assumed that 'co-creation creates value for both the customer and the producer' (Van den Broeke & Paparoidamis, 2021, p. 1). Consumers are seen as having their own motivations for co-creating with brands, and so the marketing management process becomes one of deciding the best way that these motivations can be 'successfully leveraged' (Roberts

et al., 2014, p. 149). Often this discourse is couched in the language of empowerment. So, Fernandes and Remelhe (2016) note that consumers have been 'empowered by the web' and its associated technologies, and that 'one important outcome of consumer empowerment is an increased desire to engage in the process of value co-creation' (p. 311). Co-creation can involve consumers providing work on product development and innovation (Sahi et al., 2022), packaging design (López-Mas et al., 2022), as well as marketing communication or 'advocacy' (Sahi et al., 2022) – all areas of marketing work that have traditionally been undertaken for hire or reward. Co-creation strategies can therefore be thought of as a form of out-sourcing of such work to consumers, who might be being 'paid' or 'rewarded' through the enjoyment and satisfaction they receive by taking part in the process but are, effectively, taking on financially unpaid marketing work. This sort of work can be categorised under the broad heading of what Illich (1981) refers to as 'shadow work', 'toil which is not rewarded by wages, and yet contributes nothing to the household's independence from the market' (p. 2). Some research has highlighted the complexity of the consumer-brand relationship in regard to this unpaid provision of marketing services. So, Y. J. Li et al. (2022) examine the difficult choices surrounding whether brands should contribute financially to hosting brand communities, communities that do sterling unpaid work in promoting the brand but that might not react well to perceived management and control by the brand. Asante et al. (2023) explore the amplifying linkages between brand-generated social media content, unpaid user-generated social media content about the brand, and the search engine optimisation effects of both forms of content. Game 'modders', free platform plug-in developers (i.e. for browsers such as Firefox), and producers of non-monetised free content on platforms such as YouTube are all collected under the term 'complementors' by Boudreau and Jeppesen (2015, 1761), because their unpaid work complements the platforms that they are contributing to, helping to strengthen branding and promote engagement on them. The general lessons from much of this research is that (paid) marketers working to leverage the unpaid marketing work of consumers and complementors need to manage and nurture appropriate (non-financial) motivations. This in itself, of course, is a new variety of marketing work that needs to be undertaken by the professional, full-time marketer and underlines the constantly shifting scope and responsibilities of marketing work.

The management of unpaid PTMs, complementors, user-generated content creators, etc., is important not just because of the advantages such work can afford the FTM and their organisation, but because of the potential disadvantages and dangers that such unpaid workers can produce for the brand. Scholarship identifying the destructive capacity of unpaid marketing work has been present from the early days of co-creation boosterism, attempting to balance the enthusiasm for recruiting and co-opting consumer activity with the recognition that consumers might not always want to act with a brand's best interest at heart. The promotion of brand dissatisfaction, the consumer communication of negative sentiment around products and services, represents the 'dark side' of marketing shadow work – perhaps, even, the inevitable consequence of attempting to manage part-time marketing outside the comparative simplicities of traditional financial contracts. Co-creation environments have been 'increasingly interconnected and chaotic' (Fisher & Smith, 2011, p. 325) with *control*, that ultimate marketing obsession, becoming far more slippery and elusive. As Fisher and Smith (2011) note, 'at the heart of co-creation

is the idea of strategically passing control off, letting it go, or having it ripped away by consumers' (p. 327) – and this means that the power asymmetry that marketers have always relied upon will naturally become a far more fluid and unpredictable one, with consumers sometimes having the upper hand. Indeed, the complex, sometimes paradoxical, nature of the power relationships involved can be seen in Liu et al. (2024) study indicating that making consumers feel empowered by implementing co-creation strategies can actually *discourage* brand engagement. Furthermore, a consumer in a co-creation relationship with an organisation can misuse those channels and resources available to them in order to accidentally or deliberately destroy value (Echeverri & Skålén, 2011; Plé & Cáceres, 2010). Not only does such value destruction represent a form of 'negative marketing work' undertaken by co-destroying consumers and PTMs, but marketers themselves need to *work* to defend against the destructive possibilities of co-creation situations. Dysfunctional consumers and rogue PTMs (both internally and externally situated) need to be managed and their 'work' for the firm tightly regulated towards a homeostatic optimum. As Greer (2015) points out, even *overparticipation* can have destructive effects. Laamanen and Skålén (2015) argue for a strategic action field approach to understanding the considerable complexities involved, noting that 'value co-creation takes place between collective organized actors, incumbents, and challengers who have different interests and thus are in conflict' (p. 395).

Engen et al.'s (2021) study of value co-destruction in public services makes it clear just how daunting the role of value-focused marketing work is even if one only considers internal PTMs. The possible points of value destruction within the two public service organisations that the authors examine range from long queues, phones not being answered, servers being down, and clients being unsure as to which agency to contact, to misunderstandings causing the dissemination of incorrect information, agencies misplacing documents and clients not being able to gain information about the status of their cases. While none of these issues might be thought of as covered by the traditional marketing role, Gummesson's concept of the PTM and the value-oriented understandings of marketing that have flourished during the first decades of this century demand that we consider such areas as arenas for value creation or destruction – important influencers in the impression management that PTMs are generally responsible for, and therefore essential areas of marketing work. The work of the FTM in this context must inevitably consist of training, monitoring, and course-correcting the ranks of PTMs whose competence or incompetence can so easily lead to either value co-creation or co-destruction. Yet, there has been little extant research regarding the extent of FTM involvement in such work.

It might be noted that much of the scholarly literature around the co-creation of value has tended to leave the (traditional, full-time) marketer behind, instead reaching out to the network of organisational agents whom consumers/clients interact with in value generation exchanges. Yes, the marketer might (hopefully) be responsible for the fashioning of a guiding value proposition, but so much of the 'up close and personal' work that facilitates the creation of value for the consumer is embedded in the jobs of receptionists, customer service representatives, IT system developers and support staff, and office administrators. Yet, the PTM functions that these workers are performing are rarely managed by marketers and are not therefore typically included as 'marketing work'. As Skålén et al. (2023) observe, there is a 'lack of attention to how everyday value-creating

marketing activities are conducted in firms' (p. 186). So, while the scholarly marketing literature and certain manifestations of marketing practitioner ideology (such as the recent iterations of the AMA definition of marketing) might well have evolved an understanding of marketing work that centres around the co-creation of value across a dynamic network of agents, there has been very little exploration of what this means in practice for the day-to-day experience of part-time and full-time marketing work. Is this simply just a case of adding co-creation features into the tactical considerations of the marketing planning process? Or does the traditional marketing plan need a fundamental overhaul so that it is *built* upon the idea that marketing work is co-creation work? Perhaps it could be argued that the Service-Dominant logic and service-ecosystem approaches have been evolving just such a view of marketing, one in which 'through complex interactions among multiple actors, shaped by various institutional arrangements, value is continually co-created and co-destroyed and cannot be determined ex-ante' (Vargo et al., 2017, p. 6). Such agent-based systems approaches can certainly provide insights into the heterogeneous and dynamic nature of marketing relationships across networks, and so (tangentially) generate insight into the 'messy' nature of marketing work. One of the strongest examples of this might be Hagberg and Kjellberg's (2010) investigation into 'dimensions of agential variation in market practice' which quite convincingly demonstrates that 'a shift from marketing principles to market practice must be accompanied by an increased sensitivity to diversity among agents involved in its performance' (p. 1036). What we see here is an increasing reification of the PTM concept in a vision of marketing work where the FTM conversely becomes more spectral and less present in their ability to control or manage the co-creation of value across these dynamic networks. So, as the bulk of marketing work is taken on by a florescence of non-marketers, often unfamiliar with (let alone trained in) marketing principles and strategic approaches is it possible to think that the FTM is able to, or in a position to, effectively direct these agents via a traditional marketing plan? Has 'messy' improvisation (we might call it 'just-in-time marketing management') become the dominant modality available to the FTM? And does this mean that the traditional strategic focus of marketing management must inevitably give way to a tactics-first orientation? As the marketing manager attempts to continually broker some form of stable value proposition across a population of co-creating nano-, micro- and macro-level influencers, and all the other PTMs and stakeholders that constitute the full 'agential variation', might any larger strategic planning fall to the churning ocean of tactical opportunism?

Certainly, the discursive construction of marketing management (and the work of the marketing manager) as a form of top-down command and control process that governs all marketing efforts from a position of planned strategic vision is one that is increasingly being challenged by the speed and reach of digital communication and distribution channels. Before I examine the further ramifications that these have for our constructions of marketing work, though, I wish to examine a bit more closely the question of what exactly might be 'managed' in the work of marketing management.

## Marketing work and the persuasive symbol

Given the current state of scholarly work, then, is it possible to identify dominant characteristics of marketing work that might help us integrate the PTM, FTM and value-

focused perspectives? Svensson (2007), repeating Brownlie and Saren's (1997) description of the work of the marketing manager, notes the centrality of language to what marketers do, while also admitting that this does not help to easily differentiate the marketing role from so many others in the organisation that are also dominated by discourse. In his examination of interactions between ad agency personnel and their clients, he therefore hones in on a series of more specific characteristics that serve to describe the unique nature of marketing work. Perhaps most important of all of these is the observation that marketing work consists of 'the management of symbols' (Svensson, 2007, p. 277), symbols that are identified and distilled through a careful consideration of the 'different consumer semiosis', so that they can then be used in the writing of 'marketing messages' that will resonate with the target audience. While this might well be true for a lot of work undertaken within the rather specialist realm of advertising agencies, we get a somewhat different picture from studies such as Elhajjar's (2024) that have explored the day-to-day tasks of the marketing manager, someone for whom liaising with ad agency personnel is only a very small part of their responsibilities. So, we read how the marketing managers interviewed by Elhajjar see the top six elements of their work as being to 'promote the company, its products, and/or services', 'study the market and the competition', 'develop a marketing strategy', 'define an operational marketing plan', 'manage the allocation of resources and the advertising budget' and 'implement marketing campaigns' (p. 236). It is interesting to note that the tasks and responsibilities listed by Elhajjar's respondents are very similar to those 'practical marketing activities' outlined by Hackley (2001) more than twenty years previously. The language used by Elhajjar (2024) (emerging from that used by the respondents in the study) does not immediately appear to easily map on to the terminology of Svensson's (2007) study of advertising agents. Yet, clearly Elhajjar's respondents are doing very similar things, when the patina of managerial functionalism is scraped away – first and foremost they are concerned with promotion (persuasive work focused on developing interest and resonance for the company and its products/services in consumers), promotion that cannot be done without the study and appreciation of the characteristics of the 'market' (i.e. consumers and competitors), which is then reflected in a strategic, planned approach to promotional campaigns that must take into account the realities of resource availability.

While Elhajjar's (2024) marketing managers do not seem to talk about the centrality of symbols to their everyday work, this might simply be because they have not been acculturated to such language. Indeed, it is Svensson's (2007) scholarly insight that summarises the work that his agency personnel perform as the management of symbols, rather than this terminology emerging from their own discourse. An argument could be made that the analysis of market research and competitor data *is* the analysis of symbols; and the creation of strategic marketing plans and campaign content is, similarly, the application of appropriate symbol systems, drawn from such research, for strategic ends. Levy (1959, 2012), for example, has been consistent in his description of marketing management as a profession concerned with the research and recruitment of resonant symbols. Christensen et al. (2008) note that a significant number of thinkers in the realm of Integrated Marketing Communication argue for 'the need to focus all communication efforts around a clear and distinct set of messages and symbols and to elevate the responsibility of managing these messages and symbols at the top of the organisational pyramid' (p. 428) – making the work of the marketing manager concerned with the



alignment of 'symbols, messages, procedures and behaviours across formal organisational boundaries' (p. 423). Service eco-system researchers have also argued for the central importance of symbol management in the coordinated co-creation of value across actors in a service system (Akaka et al., 2014).

At this point, we might also remind ourselves of Kenneth Burke's description of *rhetoric* as the "the use of language as a symbolic means of inducing cooperation in beings that by nature respond to symbols (Burke, 1969, p. 43). If, as Svensson (2007) argues, marketing work consists of 'the management of symbols' then this corresponds quite strongly with the Burkean conception of rhetoric. As a growing body of researchers have argued, marketing work is indeed fundamentally rhetorical in nature. Tonks (2002) states that 'persuasion can be seen as a framing concept for marketing in general and for marketing management in particular' (p. 806) and, as 'persuasion is synonymous with rhetoric', he contends that rhetoric 'is a primary driver behind exchange' and 'needs to have a more central location in making sense of marketing management' (p. 806). This position has been echoed in Nilsson (2010, 2015, 2019) examination of the rhetorical components of day-to-day marketing management work, Engbers' (2013) study of the merging of design and rhetoric traditions in the 'doing of' branding, Iglesias and Bonet's (2012) investigation of rhetorical work in brand management, the long and substantial tradition of research uncovering the rhetorical nature of promotional messaging (McQuarrie & Mick, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2003; Phillips & McQuarrie, 2002, 2004; Scott, 1990, 1994; Tom & Eves, 1999), as well as broader studies arguing for the fundamental rhetorical nature of marketing theory and practice (Cornelissen, 2003; Laufer & Paradesi, 2016; Miles, 2013, 2016, 2018; Miles & Nilsson, 2018; O'Shaughnessy & O'Shaughnessy, 2004; Torp Moberg & Andersen, 2018). Alongside such specific explorations of the rhetorical nature of marketing work there is a significant body of research that supports such a perspective through the examination of the centrality of persuasive discourse to marketing practice, such as Hackley (2001) who describes the real business of marketing as 'managed consumption and the rhetorics that are employed in the production of consumption' (p. 189), and the focus on the 'word magic' of marketing practice to be found in Brown (2009, 2010) and Brown and Wijland (2018).

A hybrid rhetorical/symbolic understanding of marketing work might describe it as the researching, planning and execution of symbolically resonant processes, experiences and strategies that will be persuasive for selected audiences and thereby contribute towards specific business goals of the organisation. The full-time marketing manager and their teams might be responsible for much of the over-arching research and planning, but the part-time marketers across the firm (and recruited amongst external stakeholders) will be responsible for a large amount of the experiential and communicative executions of the confected symbol clusters and persuasive propositions that originate with the full-time marketing team. In this sense, PTM performance (or, 'delivery', in more traditional rhetorical terminology) should 'align' (Christensen et al., 2008; Porcu et al., 2012) (in its use of resonant symbols and other discourse elements) with the planned templates generated by the FTM personnel, for whom the management of this alignment represents a further work task. Yet, as already intimated above, it might well be the case that FTMs are not able to have complete awareness of (let alone 'control' of) the 'delivery' by PTMs of resonant symbols, discourse and experiential elements communicating value. In truth, the work of aligning PTM delivery with FTM strategic understandings is not going to come in most



instances through management, because marketing managers are not the line managers of most PTMs. Instead, it is through a combination of internal and external promotion that the marketing manager must seek to persuade a shifting network of PTM agents of those understandings. And that promotion must naturally contend with a myriad of competing understandings. In the next section, I will explore the ways in which the increasing centrality of social media to marketing transforms promotional work into performance for both PTMs and FTMs.

## Social media marketing work

The exact extent and nature of this FTM management of PTM work is something that demands significant research exploration, as already indicated. However, one point that is crucial is the creeping nature of performative work. If the work of front-line, customer-facing personnel is crucial in creating an engaging and satisfying experience of the organisation via their consistent, instantiating performance of FTM-generated propositions and symbol systems, it is also the case that full-time marketers themselves have been stepping into the performative limelight in their own work.

The demands of social media marketing have meant that marketers have been steadily edging closer to performance work. The low cost and (apparent) ease-of use of social media platforms for brand communication, as well as the algorithmic pressure to post as frequently as possible, have all meant that the work that marketing managers and marketing teams might normally have contracted out to agencies, videographers, and actors, is now expected to be performed by them. The upshot of this is that both ‘influencer manager’ and ‘influencer’ have now been included in the work of the marketer (Ooi et al., 2023; Ouvrein et al., 2021). Marketing work must now include the tracking, evaluation, and selection of appropriate influencers to help disseminate the planned messaging for an organisation. There is now no shortage of evaluative frameworks and academic research designed to help marketing practitioners in the effective selection and management of influencers (Casaló et al., 2020; Li et al., 2011). At a further, ‘meta’ level, Cluley and Green (2019) explore the ways in which marketers talk about their own marketing work on social media, using ‘impression management [...] to build cultural capital and extend their networks’ while at the same time using it to ‘imbue their work with personal, social and cultural meaning’ (p. 831). Marketers are here engaged in generating their own personal brand through valorising their marketing work for their employer or their clients (who are inevitably presented as exciting, visionary, and cutting-edge). In addition, organisations might well be expecting the marketing team to stump up as spokespeople – so, Yalcin et al. (2020) argue that marketers themselves have a sustainable educator role and should be sharing educative content on social media about their brands. The ‘visual turn in social media marketing’ (Gretzel, 2017, p. 1), has a further impact upon marketing work in that the ubiquity of smartphone photography means that the marketing team are far more likely to be providing photography services themselves than they used to be as part of the pressure to produce frequent, organic content for their clients and brands. Kowalski’s (2024) study of librarian-marketers as social media content creators explores the dangers of burnout that the constant pressure to find images, write posts, reply to comments, etc., has on PTMs. And this pressure is echoed in Arriagada and Ibáñez’s (2020) exploration of professional content creators, who

need to juggle changing platforms, 'new technical configurations and algorithmic architectures and negotiating their identities as part of circuits of commerce at the expense of maintaining a community of followers around themselves, their activities, and their branded content' (p. 10). The many ways in which the increasingly frenetic demands of digital content creation are dominating PTM and FTM work is something that is only nascent in current marketing scholarship; we have been, perhaps, somewhat blinded by the alluring prospect of treating content creators and influencers on one side and marketers on the other side. Influencers have been seen as marketing *tools* rather than actual marketers (freelance marketing agents specialising in a particular sector). Yet influencers are doing marketing work and marketers are doing influencer work. The distinctions have become unhelpful.

Such issues underline the performance aspect of contemporary marketing work – tasks which make the marketer into a performer (i.e. the transformation into an influencer), someone identifiable not through the trace of their strategic choices or their management of others, but through the personal, communicative act and the construction of the sorts of parasocial relationships we expect from online influencers. While there is an increasingly large literature on the marketing uses of social media (for indicative overviews see Alves et al., 2016; Appel et al. 2020; Brennan, 2012; Burton & Soboleva, 2011; Cartwright et al., 2021; Hollebeek et al., 2014; Ibrahim, 2022; Kim & Kim, 2021; King et al., 2014; F. Li et al., 2021; Schultz & Peltier, 2013; Shawky et al., 2019) there is very little consideration of how these platforms have changed the nature of marketing work.

Perhaps one way in which we might distinguish certain manifestations of the part-time marketer from the full-time marketer might be the extent to which their marketing work includes strategic elements rather than solely tactical ones. Writing a marketing plan that contains (hopefully, SMART) objectives, is based on researching target audiences and markets, and explicitly makes decisions around segmentation, targeting, and positioning (along with, perhaps, a value proposition) which is work that PTMs are unlikely to be doing – PTM work being, initially, predominantly tactical. However, over time and as a result of increasing familiarity with the tactical aspects of marketing work it is quite possible that strategic meta-level thinking emerges as part of the PTM role. Certainly, exploration of the way in which FTM and PTM roles merge and oscillate around the preponderance of either strategic or tactical tasks would be an interesting question for future research.

## **Datafication and marketing work**

While writing and other creative practices (such as social media performance) might make up a significant part of day-to-day marketing work, the profession, of course, has seen an increasing focus on the generation, analysis, and management of data and this is inevitably reflected in the nature of marketing work (Aimé et al., 2022; Cadden et al., 2023; Johnson et al., 2019). Kurtzke and Setkute (2021) use the term 'digital marketing analytics' to describe the tightly related areas of digital analytics, marketing analytics, and digital marketing. They note that while 'the digital environment now represents marketing's key strategic site for the creation of value' (p. 301) and 'data-driven marketing' tasks are making up an increasing part of the marketing role, there is little reflection of this in the curricula of marketing degrees that are designed to prepare students for the world of

marketing work. Yeoh (2019) similarly argues that ‘what will set marketing graduates apart is their ability to interpret data, leverage technical tools, and apply their insights and work in partnership with other teams’ (p. 261). Cluley et al. (2020) investigation into the changing roles of marketing researchers finds that the increasing use of digital data has ‘created new tasks which do not sit easily within the traditional patterns of work in the marketing research industry’ (p. 28), effectively adding the roles of ‘social scientist’ and ‘storyteller’ to their traditional skill set. The relationship between these two roles, the collection and analysis of data and the use of findings from the data analysis to then ‘bring consumers to life’ (ibid.) is something examined by Florence (2024) who grounds the core storytelling work of ‘identifying the “so what?” insights from the data, distilling insights into a few salient points of view and clarifying the “now what?” recommendations’ (p. 134) in the application of critical thinking skills. Florence (2024) further notes that despite the fact that the data analytics skills gap is often identified as the most significant in practitioner surveys, ‘businesses looking to fix the skills gap often focus on providing support in the wrong areas’, because ‘wrangling with data in tools and platforms will not help the marketing department close the skills gap and excel at data storytelling’ (p. 140). It is only through the insight generated through critical thinking that an ‘effective data story’ can be built up by marketing teams. Similar conclusions have been made by other researchers looking at the broader skill sets and knowledge that practitioners and employers say they value in those looking to join the marketing work force. AsDiGregorio et al. (2019) conclude, ‘digital capabilities are not replacing the traditional marketing skills’, and so those being trained to walk into the data-driven work of the modern marketing team still need ‘to develop the building blocks of the marketing profession, i.e. core capabilities linked to organisation, planning, critical thinking, and strategic acumen’ (p. 257). So, while marketers are being expected to engage with data more (and with *more* data) the skills that they need to do this work effectively appear to spring from those ‘building blocks of the marketing profession’ (DiGregorio et al., 2019, p. 257). In this sense, we might talk of datafication as an *extension* of marketing work in a similar way that the demands of social media marketing have extended the use of the marketing ‘building blocks’ to new platforms, with new metrics, new negotiating partners, and new demands of creative performance (photography, marketer-as-spokesperson, marketer-as-influencer). The ways in which the demands of data as well as of emerging technologies are continually negotiated across marketing teams and their organisational partners is well portrayed in Fran Hyde’s (2020) creative study of ‘difficult marketing’ work in a hospice. New technologies and platforms come and go and work inevitably has to be done to research, trial, and fully implement their marketing integration, work that will sometimes be rewarded with success (the adoption of social media to promote the hospice, in Hyde’s, 2020, narrative) and sometimes with admission of failure or ‘the time is not right’ (as with the installation of a chatbot for the hospice’s website).

## Artificial intelligence and the automation of marketing work

The advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) is something that has already caused much discussion regarding its implications for marketing work. The elegant play of algorithms across the vast data structures of Large Language Models have raised the prospect of truly human-like marketing strategising at the touch of a button

(or an efficiently worded prompt). GAI is also being used to obviate the need for marketing research with actual humans, using AI-generated synthetic data, while marketing content creators (of copy, images, as well as overall design) are finding that even the early iterations of GAI platforms are capable of powerful tactical executions (even if they do currently need significant revision). Vlačić et al. (2021), Haleem et al. (2022), Chintalapati and Pandey (2022), and Mariani et al. (2022), have provided early systematic literature reviews of research on the use of AI for marketing purposes. Huang and Rust (2022) posit a framework for 'collaborative artificial intelligence in marketing' (p. 209) which envisages AI taking over 'undesirable marketing tasks' (p. 212) (which the authors gloss as 'repetitive, routine, or dangerous tasks'), providing 'lower-level' AI that can help to augment 'higher-level' human intelligence ('in order to avoid unnecessary or counter-productive' human intelligence 'replacement'; p. 215) and human intuition and emotional intelligence (by analysing data in quick and easy to process ways that furnish humans with more insight to feed into their human decision making). Their framework is an optimistic one that sees human marketing work being made less focused on routine, boring tasks and more focused on enhanced (augmented) strategic planning and management and this positive perspective is typical of a lot of the early literature around marketing and AI. Certainly, there seems to be some indication from the marketing trade press that AI has been onboarded by marketers as a way of dealing with the extension of their workload caused by social media, as discussed above. Carroll (2024) for an article in *Marketing Week*, quotes figures from recent surveys of marketing practitioners by Overcast HQ and Censuswide that show that 'around two-thirds (67%) of marketers [are] looking at AI to manage video content' that they are now 'struggling' to deal with due to the 'increasing volumes of content needed to fuel multiple channels'. So, one new technological platform being used to try to balance the massive extension of marketing work brought about by another technological platform. In addition, practitioner influencers such as Mark Ritson (2023, 2024) have been telling stories about the impact that the use of AI-generated synthetic data has been having on marketing departments with the sorts of budgets to leverage the technology. While the need for marketers to run focus groups and survey consumers is not going away, the actual nature of that work looks to be transformed as a result of AI – the particular soft skills needed to run focus groups well are unnecessary when the focus group is entirely synthetic. Certain areas of marketing work might therefore be becoming far more distant from the target audience than they have ever been – and what might it mean when the *customer* being *oriented towards* is synthetic rather than 'real'? Furthermore, as GAI platforms such as jasper.ai and copy.ai demonstrate, developers are recognising the demand that marketers have for GAI-driven full marketing pipeline products (a 'go to market' solution, as copy.ai is dubbed<sup>1</sup>) that can provide strategic vision and planning as well as tactical work. The potential here is that marketing management work becomes oriented around prompt construction and top-level supervision of GAI output. The marketing plan (with all its problematic assumptions, of course) becomes subsumed into the GAI black box and FTMs can be left to hallucinate a fantasy of total control, relying on synthetic consumer data, synthetic design teams, and synthetic focus groups. Has the advent of GAI, in other words, finally provided the ultimate dream of a fully deodorised marketing?

## Gender and marketing work

Although the rapid encroachment of datafication and marketing-specific GAI platforms might indicate that marketing work is becoming virtualised and disembodied, there is much that still anchors it to the corporeal nature of human work. So, while there has been a steady increase in scholarship examining the ways in which marketing work produces and reproduces gender inequalities (Dobscha's, 2019 edited handbook of research on gender and marketing is a good introduction) the realities of gender in the marketing workplace have been examined by a much smaller, though no less significant, stream of research. Marketing work appears to remain highly inequitable in terms of gender, race, and class. The *Marketing Week* 2024 Career and Salary Survey reveals that while the gender pay gap has narrowed (by a miniscule 0.5%) it 'remains double the national average' (Innes, 2024). This would seem to signal that the *value* of different aspects of marketing work is highly gendered and that an industry that might be superficially characterised by chasing the bleeding edge of innovation is in fact strongly mired in traditional stereotypes.

Maclaran et al. (1997) groundbreaking study of the 'glasshouse effect' experienced by women marketing managers describes the ways in which their participants felt 'contained on all sides within their organization' (p. 316), 'marginalized' and largely prevented from 'gaining access to work which they know to be more highly valued within organizations, such as strategic decision making and long-term planning' (p. 315). In a slightly later development of this research, Maclaran and Catterall (2000) note the way in which the 'influx of women into the profession in recent years' has taken a distinctly gendered form (a 'feminisation' in their terminology), with women coming 'to dominate in marketing roles associated with a strong customer interface, for example, marketing research, public relations and customer care' (p. 635). Yet, they argue, this feminisation of some area of the marketing workplace has had a 'negligible' impact, with women remaining 'excluded in the main from wider-reaching strategic decisions and involvement in the main power relationships' (p. 638). Both Maclaran et al. (1997) and Maclaran and Catterall (2000) contain comments that speak of the prospect of impending change in the industry, yet despite a gap of over twenty years, it seems that the 'glasshouse effect' still has a serious impact on women's work in the marketing profession. Topić's research on women working in advertising (Topić, 2021) and public relations (Topić, 2023) has demonstrated that the work women and men do in these marketing professions is performed in distinctly gendered ways. Her research demonstrates that 'blokishness is manifested in PR organisations in a way that presents a structural barrier for many women' (Topić, 2023, p. 35) and that only through embracing 'blokish' behaviour can women succeed and get ahead in PR. Topić (2021) study of women working in advertising found similar results, demonstrating that 'advertising offices are centred on masculinity and what seems central is that there is a masculine habitus in the advertising offices where men dominate social interactions and banter, whilst also engaging in sexism through the devaluation and discrimination of women' (p. 768). Thompson-Whiteside et al. (2021) echo similar findings, noting that 'beyond moral arguments for equity, the dominance of men [in advertising] is having a profound influence on the culture of creative departments, the progression of women to the top of the creative career ladder, and ultimately the adverts that are made' (p. 294).

Interestingly, though from a quite different perspective, one can perhaps trace the 'blokish' culture that informs Woodall's (2012) critical question – 'Does marketing, then, both by heritage and design, attract the risk-taker, the hedonist, the ethically ambivalent?' (p. 177).

We see from the evidence of these studies that not just the marketing workplace, but marketing work, remains distinctly gendered. What influence might the male habitus have on the ways in which strategic planning is done in the industry. Just how much 'maleness' (or 'blokishness') is instantiated in the form and tradition of the marketing plan, and the ways in which segmentation, targeting and positioning form the core of strategic conceptualization? To what extent is the distinction between part-time marketer and full-time marketer a reflection of male views of work, the workplace, and professional expertise? While scholarship on feminism and marketing (for overviews see Caterrall et al., 2001; Maclaran, 2012; Maclaran & Kravets, 2018) has made inroads into the analysis of consumption, advertising representations, and marketing scholarship from a feminist perspective, there is a strong need for more research on the gendered nature of marketing work and the marketing management paradigm more broadly. Thompson-Whiteside and Turnbull's (2021) study examines the ways in which women in marketing communication work have attempted to organise resistance to harassment and bullying, particularly focusing on Les Lionnes' efforts within the French advertising industry to combat sexism in the workplace, enabling '360 women to come together, outside of their institutional arrangements, to collaborate in challenging existing practices and power arrangements' (p. 133). Given the power that female online influencers appear to command in certain industries much research needs to be done around the dynamics of value extraction (and exploitation) that are negotiated between brand FTM and online PTM in this context. While influencers might be understood by brands as operant resources to be exploited, influencers themselves might see brands in the same way. Public statements paying lip-service to the 'empowering' language of co-creation, collaboration and partnership might well hide more inequitable and exploitative power relations. Worryingly, though, Dobscha and Ostberg (2021) speak of an 'increased resistance to gender scholarship' and it is to be hoped that this does not materialise further and dampen the exploration of gender dynamics in contemporary marketing work.

## Conclusion

We are living in a furious expansion of marketing work. More and more people are doing marketing work (for themselves, their company, their employer, or their team) who have not been trained (or enculturated or socialised) within marketing teams or formally studied marketing. Such people are not *only* marketers – they are librarians, university teachers, day-traders, surfboard builders, sports shoe flippers, food truck owners, and so on. The marketing work they do (that makes them part-time marketers) should be an essential focus of scholarly research because it represents the generally unattended base of marketing practice. At the same time, the marketing work that those in actual marketing teams, agencies, and departments do has also been extending and growing rapidly, trying to keep up with the voracious demands (and alluring possibilities) of social media platforms, content creation paradigms, and data harvesting technologies. Marketing

scholarship has not kept pace with the rate, extent, and quality of this extension. Marketing work remains under-examined and under-conceptualised, ignored in favour of a focus on technologies, outputs, platforms, frameworks, and theorisations that remain all too distant from the locations and contexts where marketing work happens.

Gummesson's (1991) introduction of the part-time marketer concept was an important opportunity for marketing scholarship to re-dedicate itself to investigating the myriad and nuanced ways in which the marketing function is instantiated throughout organisations, groupings, and networks; to seek out the fundamental work that characterises marketing when it is done, irrespective of who is doing it, but to also explore the impact of agency and context on that fundamental work. Yet, this potential has largely been wasted, while its relevance has soared. While, as this paper has endeavoured to show, there are strong research streams that are focused on a variety of aspects of marketing work, they represent only a very small voice in the discourse of marketing scholarship. As a consequence, serious issues around work pressures, work disparities, leaky boundaries around marketing work, and shifting/competing conceptions regarding the core and scope of such work, all remain largely occulted or ignored. It is time, perhaps, for marketing scholarship to focus on the myriad varieties of the *marketer* and their work in ways that we have been so far mostly only enthusiastic to do for the *consumer*.

Finally, the comparatively untapped potential of the concept of the PTM, alongside the rampant digitalisation of marketing processes and roles, and the complex, variegated nature of marketing co-creation relationships all go to underline the need for marketing scholarship to embrace the messy, raw, and polymorphous nature of marketing work. The paradigm of control, for so long the ascendant approach to how we think about the work of marketing (Miles, 2010, 2016, 2018) is not well suited to the dynamic navigation of shifting co-creations of value between multiple stakeholders, PTMs, and FTMs. We need to encourage concerted attempts to examine, in our scholarship and in our classrooms, the messy reality of what actually gets done as marketing work, rather than insist on reiterating once again the neat, bounded, static control sequences that we have often been happier to adopt 'as if' they were the real thing.

## Note

1. copy.ai URL: <https://copy.ai> [Accessed 25/1/25]

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Chris Miles** teaches, researches, and publishes in the areas of persuasive communication, marketing theory, marketing communication, and applications of rhetorical frameworks to strategic and political communication. His work also reflects an abiding interest in the cybernetics of communication (particularly second-order cybernetics and systems approaches) and how this relates to what Krippendorff calls "multilogical world constructions".



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