Marketing and Feminism: Past, Present and Future

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Marketing Stream.

ABSTRACT
This paper addresses the intersection between marketing and feminism, reflecting on past and current associations and considering future possibilities. Whilst the main aim is to consider the future possibilities for marketing and feminism, the past and the present provide the context within which the future can be envisioned. Our central argument is that feminist perspectives on marketing need to move forward. Too often feminist marketing academics have overlooked the subtleties and contradictions inherent in marketing practices. These have had both positive and negative impacts on the social and political position of women. Contrary to the very explicit emancipatory aims of feminism, feminist analyses of marketing are in danger of becoming institutionalised as yet another brand of elitist and intellectually abstracted critique, indistinguishable from ‘other’ perspectives and confined to the pages of the academic marketing journals. Finally, the paper considers future possibilities for feminism and marketing and addresses the various ways that feminism might engage more constructively with marketing. It concludes by suggesting how feminist marketing academics might move beyond critique to engagement and transformation.

INTRODUCTION
The work of feminist scholars tends to go beyond the description, explanation, or understanding of phenomena (Ozanne and Stern, 1993). Feminist theory and research incorporates the twin aims of social criticism and social change. Feminist scholars as social critics have exposed knowledge as gendered. As advocates of social change, they seek to redress the gender imbalance in knowledge by offering alternative theories and methods of creating knowledge. The overall aim of both social criticism and social change is to highlight and improve the position of women.
severe weaknesses in marketing, they often fail to give corresponding attention to its strengths.

In these ways, feminist critiques of marketing have much in common with those drawing from Frankfurt School critical theory, post-modernism, post-structuralism, radical ecology and post-colonialism. Of course these critiques are important in a discipline that is often lacking in critical reflection of its own assumptions. However, there is a danger that feminism along with other critical perspectives are seen as offering a single and largely undifferentiated alternative perspective from mainstream work. Whilst all researchers in the critical stream do in fact share some assumptions, the relationships between women and marketing are quite different from the experiences of other groups. Marketing practices have, in many ways, predicated an improvement in the social and political position of women. Nor is this a recent phenomenon: it was evident before the emergence of modern marketing (Scott, 1999).

In the discussion that follows we examine the relationships between marketing and feminism in terms of the past, the present and the future. Firstly we review the past literature where the paths of marketing and feminism rarely crossed and we then go on to discuss the recent and current developments at this intersection. We argue that feminist scholarship in marketing is in danger of losing its own distinctive voice as it assimilates itself into the wider, more general categories of critical/interpretive/gender work.

Whilst it is certainly true that these critiques can often draw strength from uniting, in that very unity there is also the potential for each to lose its own, distinct identity. We argue that the future task of feminist marketing scholars is to re-establish feminist voices within marketing and that these voices should not be diluted as increased attention is devoted to gender studies. Not to do so, we believe, is to risk overlooking the particular subtleties that underpin marketing’s relationship with feminism, a relationship whereby marketing can simultaneously use and, more importantly from a feminist perspective, be used by women. In other words, marketing can be perceived in both an exploitative and a liberating light. Our paper sets this relationship in its historical context and we draw on this to illustrate a vision for the future.

PAST INTERSECTIONS
Gender rather than feminism was an issue in marketing past. In spite of its salience, gender was not well understood or conceptualised in marketing theory, research or
The many analyses of gender representations in advertising during the 1970s and 1980s did not refer to the growing body of theory on gender, nor did they draw from the literature on gender and marketing phenomena developed by feminist scholars working in other disciplines. Even Rena Bartos’ (1982) groundbreaking work that highlighted marketer’s misconceptions about female consumers did not draw from this literature. The failure to acknowledge the feminist literature on these issues was perhaps due to the fact that the mass entry of women into the business and management professions and into university business and management programmes is a comparatively recent phenomenon (Stern, 1996). This may also help explain why so few women were profiled or mentioned in the various histories of marketing thought (Bartels, 1962). It may be the case that women did not figure in this history because they were not present in sufficient numbers.

However, it seems more likely that marketing historians will need to be more imaginative in the places they look to find women’s contributions: Waller-Zukerman and Carsky (1990) examined the contribution of home economists (predominantly women) to our understanding of consumer behaviour. McDonald and King (1996) pointed out that there were a number of women amongst the founders of the Market Research Society in Britain during the 1940s. Women were also making key contributions to the market research and advertising industries around this same period in the USA, notably Herta Herzog (Bartos, 1986). Whilst women might not have been present in the marketing academy or its mainstream literature, they were present as marketing practitioners and their influence on practice has yet to be explored.

CURRENT ENGAGEMENTS
The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the introduction of many radical new perspectives on marketing, including feminism. The first publications concentrated on presenting feminist thought to a marketing audience and exploring the possibilities for feminist perspectives in marketing and consumer research (Ozanne and Stern, 1993). These papers drew attention to the ways that marketing theory and research can trivialise and essentialise women and sex/gender issues. They also argued that theory and knowledge in marketing and consumer research are gendered in unrecognised ways.

Bristor and Fischer (1993) presented a challenge to the way gender-based knowledge
Research regularly include papers on gender issues in marketing (Dobscha, 1993; Larsen, 1993).

Relationships with Other Perspectives
Of course not all studies of gender in marketing refer to feminist work on gender and certainly feminists do not own the category gender. However, we argue that after the mid-1990s the emancipatory potential of feminist work in marketing began to dissipate as it became assimilated under categories of gender and interpretive consumer research. Whilst undoubtedly contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the relationship between marketing and gender, few of these papers were written from a feminist perspective.

We would also argue that feminism, along with Critical Theory, postmodernism and other critical perspectives, began to lose some of their radical and emancipatory potential as increasingly they were perceived to be part of a larger interpretive movement. These researchers and their research were seen as sharing similar assumptions, and even agendas (Belk, 1995). Indeed just as those within this interpretive movement characterised the mainstream as a single discourse, those in the mainstream tarred with the same brush all those who did not share their interests and agenda as interpretive or post-modern. It is also the case that many researchers within the critical and interpretive movements took comfort from other like-minded researchers in the marketing academy that shared the view of the need for change in the representation of marketing theory and research. It is in this sense that the polyvocality of critical perspectives that individually challenged the marketing establishment in the late 1980s and early 1990’s was in danger of becoming univocal.

Feminist scholars are often sceptical of alliances with other groups of critical scholars. Postmodernism seemed to offer some new impetus to feminist scholarship during the late 1980s. However in spite of the growth of post-feminism, it failed to convince many feminists that it offered any real scope for the analysis of women’s issues and gender. Postmodernists argue that gender is one of those universalising and unhelpful binaries that typify modern Western thought. Many feminists agree with this position but are reluctant to dispense with this binary. Bordo (1990, p.152), for example, pointed out ‘like it or not, in our present culture, our activities are coded as ‘male’ or ‘female’ ..... One cannot be gender neutral in this culture’. Similarly, the relationship between feminists and Critical Theorists has never been an easy one. Although Critical
is important at a time when women are increasingly filling marketing positions, and at a senior level, in academic and practitioner marketing. The impact of this on the marketing discipline and on marketing practices has yet to be examined.

**Current Feminist Perspectives on Marketing**

An overriding theme in the work of feminist marketing academics is that marketing either misunderstands or misappropriates women. This position is not so different from the standpoint of contemporary feminist academics from other management disciplines such as organisation studies, human relations, economics and accountancy all of which represented the mainstream work in their respective disciplines as marginalising women and women’s issues.

It also reflects the work of feminist scholars from disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies who have examined marketing and consumption phenomena. One of the avowed aims of feminist scholars is to bring the study of women and topics of interest and importance to women into the academic foreground. Since the consumer is usually assumed to be female, Campbell (1995) stated that we should not be surprised that feminist scholars are interested in the study of consumption. Since the 1970s a considerable feminist literature has accumulated which simultaneously confronts and confirms our marketing assumptions about women as consumers. There are feminist analyses of women and food, diet, body image, eating out, fashion, romance fiction, glossy magazines, savings and debt, home decorating, technology and design, shopping, sport and leisure.

Two examples will illustrate this work. Varney (1996) examined the relationship between women, food and toys. She points out the social expectations for women to be like food, ‘attractive, appetising and consumable’ and, employing the food imaged Strawberry Shortcake dolls, shows how these expectations are sustained. Cockburn (1997) demonstrates how unequal gender relations shape the development of new technologies and reinforce or reshape gender inequality in domestic settings. Product engineers consider housework technology to be simple and uninteresting whereas working on leisure and entertainment technology is seen as challenging state-of-the-art work.

It should be noted that market researchers and marketing practitioners have long realised that domestic and leisure technology and even food products are gender-
always had and continues to have positive as well as negative aspects; it can simultaneously have exploitative and emancipatory potential.

To illustrate what we mean more clearly, we now consider two areas that have been the subjects of many feminist critiques.

1. Women and department stores
Traditionally feminists have viewed the advent of the department store with great suspicion, as an arch seducer of women (Bowlby, 1987; Reekie, 1993). The common view from this perspective is that retailers, managers and marketing experts bonded as men to form a fraternity whose primary object was to reap profits from compliant female customers. Indeed, Reekie (1993) goes so far as to accuse the department store of creating a sexual culture which first formulated and then reinforced men’s power over women. She argues that the department store provided popular and accessible models of sexual identities and conduct, particularly giving modern meaning to male and female bodies, and thereby defining manhood and womanhood together with all the associated stereotypes.

An aspect that is frequently overlooked in these critiques, however, is that these forces also created a new and anonymous public arena in which women could safely venture (Chaney, 1983). Furthermore they provided an acceptable and legitimate place where women could visit unaccompanied by a male escort. Of course feminists remain highly sceptical of Selfridge’s reputed quote that he:

“had helped to emancipate women. I came along just at the time they wanted to step out on their own. They came to the store and realised some of their dreams.”

Yet Nava (1992) and others (Chaney 1983; Lancaster, 1995) have put forward evidence to support this claim, both from the viewpoint of woman as consumer and woman as worker. As consumers, women suddenly had an area of expertise that was legitimised in the public sector (Nava, 1992). This also led to a heightened awareness of women’s entitlement outside the sphere of consumption and Nava (1992) believes that this made a significant contribution to the conditions for modern feminism.

As workers, these stores provided a major source of employment and offered many
2. Women and their magazines
The so-called gender dichotomy of the marketplace that led to a perception of women (consumers) as passive and acted upon by men (producers) is graphically illustrated in the women’s magazines genre. From their birth in the eighteenth century women’s magazines marked the advent of women as shoppers rather than readers. As such they represented an alliance between ideological and economic imperatives, between the remaking of femininity and the material basis of women’s magazines in advertising revenue (Beetham, 1996). Femininity and consumption had become inseparable; indeed by the 1950s women were ‘completely caught up’ in defining their femininity in terms of consumption (Winship, 1987).

In the 1980s and early 1990s there were a number of feminist studies of women’s magazines, primarily within the cultural studies and women’s studies disciplines. These attacked magazines’ oppressive power over and exploitation of women. It was argued that women’s magazines were part of a social, cultural and economic mechanism designed to control and tyrannise women, ‘steering’ them along a particular path of femininity, a particular path of insatiable consumption (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1991; Winship, 1987; McCracken, 1993). Wolf, for example, went so far as to describe women’s magazines as eliciting ‘a raving, itching, parching product lust’, in her savage attack on the beauty myth in 1991 (p. 70).

However, for every feminist critique of women’s magazines there has increasingly been a celebration of women’s magazines for their liberatory potential, their ability to offer multiple choices, multiple identities, and multiple pleasures for women. Moore (1986), for example, argued for a much more positive and proactive view of women readers of magazines, one that acknowledged that we could be selective and playful as consumers. She took the women as shopper metaphor on a stage further when she wrote that magazines allowed women to browse without necessarily buying anything on offer; in other words magazines could offer pleasure in their own right, pleasure that sometimes led to purchase, but not necessarily. By 1993 Winship too was quoting Nava’s (1987) observation that women could read magazines ‘critically and selectively’ and yet at the same time not disavow more traditional feminine identities and pleasures.

This mood has continued with studies by Radner (1995), Ano (1996) and Hermes
norms (Modleski, 1982; Ballaster et al, 1991; McCracken, 1993; Beetham, 1996). Ultimately, then, we may perceive women’s magazines as speaking the heteroglossia of women’s experience (Radner, 1995) rather than offering a univocal position, of celebrating feminisms rather than defining femininity, of empowering women rather than enslaving them.

These two synopses reveal some of the contradictions and ambiguities that are inherent in marketing’s relationship with women. Whilst they emphasise the beneficial outcomes for women, this can also be interpreted as absolving marketing from any further responsibility of understanding better or more fully the female consumer. However, from this perspective marketing benefits women consumers only by default. Thus, marketing has been passive in the liberatory aspects of this relationship; it is the women who have been active, using the marketing system for their own ends.

Currently, feminist analyses of marketing are based on two models. In the first marketing actively exploits women’s vulnerabilities, and in the second marketing is somehow more passive as consumers do the work of adapting products, services and messages to suit their own needs. The sub-texts here are that marketers are either unaware of the ways their products are disrupted by consumers, or are incapable of doing anything about it. It is also possible that marketers fully recognise the ways that female consumers ‘use’ their products and that both parties are knowing and willing players in a sophisticated game of active/passive role switching. It is these subtexts that feminist marketing academics need to question and take forward in their future research. This means that the focus of feminist research within marketing needs to shift to a critical examination of marketing as understood and practised by marketing practitioners.

FUTURE DISENGAGEMENTS AND RE-ENGAGEMENTS

It remains the case that women’s issues are not explicitly on wider marketing agendas, either in academic research or in professional practice. The success of feminism has been due largely to its focus on women and women’s issues that were previously ignored or not taken seriously. A feminist presence in marketing is important to raise awareness of these issues and thus we need to maintain a distinctive voice. A distinctive voice does not mean a single voice and feminist work in marketing can benefit from the heterogeneity inherent in feminism. The task for us is to recognise this
If our work is to begin to realise its emancipatory aims it needs to be read, studied and critically analysed and evaluated by our academic and practitioner colleagues, and our students. It will not do this unless we engage more positively with marketing practice and practitioners. It should be noted that other critical scholars within management have made a similar case, notably Alvesson and Willmott (1992).

It remains the case that many women academics and practitioners neither identify with nor support the need for feminist analyses of marketing as a discipline or a professional practice. If feminist scholarship is to have a future in marketing, we simply cannot ignore this issue. After all, our work makes claims to either speak for or reflect the interests and concerns of women who work in marketing and who, as consumers, are the subject of marketing practices.

Feminist marketing researchers have tended to focus on the relationship between marketing and women as consumers. Few studies explore the ways in which marketing practitioners actually conceptualise women as consumers or how they feel about their marketing activities in relation to women. Rather we critically examine their outputs, such as advertising campaigns, media and new products. For example, reader-response theory has been applied to various feminist readings of cinema (Hirschman, 1993). Similarly, few studies focus on the women who work in the profession (Maclaran et al, 1998). There is a small number of studies of women in sales roles in the marketing literature (Larsen, 1993; Schul and Wren, 1992) and a number of profession sponsored surveys of members in marketing professions (Winstanley, 1993).

A growing number of women have entered marketing employment and the various marketing related professions and industries such as market research and advertising. As greater numbers of females enter the marketing professions this raises a number of issues including the impact women may or may not have on professional values and practices and on professional status. Cooper (1999) has argued that the female dominated qualitative market research industry in Britain has altered the ways that marketing and brand managers conceptualise the consumer, the brand and their interrelationship. However, there have been no empirical studies to examine this and other issues relating to women in the profession. By contrast, researchers have examined the position of women within the accountancy profession. Roberts and Coutis (1992) analysed the feminisation of the accounting profession and identified the
recognise that the relationship between marketing and feminism is more subtle and contradictory than it is often portrayed.

We have also benefited both on a personal and a scholarly level from being part of a wider community of critical and interpretive scholars within marketing. This community provides outlets for our work and support in the face of criticism from marketing researchers and practitioners who consider that feminism has no place in marketing theory and practice. However, we are in danger of softening the distinctive feminist stamp on our work as it merges into the broader categories of interpretive/critical/gender research. After all, a research interest in gender issues bears no explicit commitment to the core emancipatory aims of feminism. If we fail to acknowledge this fundamental difference we run the risk of falling into the seductive traps of intellectual abstraction and elitism.

In order to reclaim the ground for feminist work, therefore, we need to remind ourselves that theory and practice is indivisible; studying and developing theory around and arising out of our everyday lives as women in marketing. To achieve this we need to consider and gather together the experiences of women as marketers and consumers, and then theorise these. For feminist marketing academics theory alone cannot be the outcome of research, our research needs to be translated into practical recommendations for action. In a forthcoming article Stern (2000) demonstrates from a feminist perspective how advertising texts are gendered. Significantly, she concludes by offering practical suggestions as to how advertising might bring about an improvement in the condition of women. It is this focus which differentiates feminist research from ‘other’ critical perspectives, a recognition that it is not enough to offer theory and abstract ruminations on what feminism can bring to marketing. Rather there must be a commitment to what marketing can do for women and to what women can do for marketing; a commitment to practice and praxis.

REFERENCES


