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Agencing the digitalised marketer: Exploring the boundary workers at the cross-road of (e)merging markets

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Synopsis

In this study, we explore the rise of the digitalized marketer, bridging strategic and data-driven marketing. Using constructivist market studies, we highlight “agencing” as boundary work and the diverse boundary workers shaping the marketer’s role. Drawing from 63 interviews with marketing professionals, we reveal challenges in navigating digital marketing tools. We highlight the growing ‘market for digital marketing’ that plays a pivotal role in shaping digitalized marketers. We present two agencing modes, prosthetic and habilitative, to illustrate how digitalized markets and platforms both empower and restrict marketer agency. Additionally, we shed light on how marketers and their networks contest these boundaries and expand their influence. Our work extends the need to reconnect marketing with markets, recognizing their reciprocal relationship. We discuss implications for theory, practice, and marketing education, preparing marketers for an increasingly digitalized environment.

Introduction and Background

Digital technologies are spreading across the marketing discipline and are changing the way marketing gets done. It has been recognised in the literature that digitalisation is shaping markets through adjustments in market elements, forms and processes (Hagberg and Kjellberg, 2020). In turn, these adjustments reshape market actors, such as digital

consumers (Cluley and Brown, 2015; Cochoy et al., 2017; Fuentes and Sörum, 2019). However, there is a lack of studies in marketing theory on how the marketer is adapting to their new working environment in seeking to close the identified skills gap between traditional and digital marketing (see e.g. Royle and Lang, 2014). Exceptions to this can be found in work of Cluley who describe the emergent dual role of marketer in the digital age as social scientist and storyteller (Cluley et al., 2019; Cluley, 2021). Several aspects remain unclear: how do market professionals work to develop the necessary skills in the transition from traditional, strategy-driven, and digital/data-driven marketing to digitalised marketing, to integrate social and technical capabilities, and how they manage to keep those worlds together.

We address this gap by taking a Constructivist Market Studies (CMS) approach. This approach is concerned with the performance of marketing that is sensitive to the hybrid combinations of devices, individuals and organisations that partake in marketing work and in the configuration of market actors (Hagberg and Kjellberg, 2010). In taking this approach, we draw attention to the collective efforts required in the performance of marketing. That is, to the agencing of which the marketer is part alongside the ‘market for digitalised marketing’ which we see as a key device in the agencing (Cochoy et al., 2016) of contemporary marketing work.

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Issues and Questions Considered

The changing nature of marketing work has received continued attention in the marketing academy. Much of this work addresses the concern raised by Skalen and Hackley (2011) on the lack of 'bottom-up' empirical research into how marketing is actually done in organisations. While the earliest writings on the marketing professional emphasised the actions and activities of marketers, subsequent themes focussed more on the status of marketing as a profession and the nature of the discipline itself (Hunt 1992, 1994). In this paper we seek to redirect focus to the practices of the marketer in the continuous and changing role of marketing work by drawing on Constructivist Market Studies. To achieve this goal we developed a conceptual framework building on the works of Callon (2005) and the notion of agencements. Within the field of market studies, agencements has been proposed as an important tool to understand the configuration of market actors. A central point of difference between market studies and more cultural or discursive approaches to marketing practices is that, from the former perspective, the marketing professional is not seen as defined a priori, 'whose behaviour is either hardwired in their brains, or is to be explained by their position in communities, networks and cultures' (Cochoy et al., 2016:3). Instead, Michel Callon draws our attention to the collective nature of agency in describing market agencement (Callon, 2008). The notion of agencement goes beyond an account of the structural relationships between actants in actor networks, to consider socio-technical arrangements from the point of view of their capacity to act and to give meaning to action (Çalışkan and Callon 2010). From this perspective, we view the digitalised marketer as a socio-material hybrid collective whose capacity to act depend(s) on how it is continually being constituted (Hagberg, 2016).

Methodology

Data collection occurred in two phases: the first phase comprised seven in-person interviews with marketers across various sectors, primarily from small to medium-sized enterprises. The second phase involved online interviews with 56 marketers from diverse backgrounds, industries, geographical

locations, and self-identifications as either 'marketer' or 'digital marketer.' In total, 63 interviews were conducted. The research employed the 'Interview to the double' (ITTD) method to explore the complexity of practices, encouraging respondents to articulate their daily routines and their purpose within the broader context. This interactive method allowed for a deeper understanding of the practices, preventing the use of vague or overly technical language. Data analysis focused on what marketers did, who or what influenced their actions, the skills and competencies involved, and the ongoing configuration of actors.

Outcomes and Findings

The proliferation of marketing tools is shaping the marketing landscape, with many free-to-use applications both enabling and limiting marketers' actions. The constant evolution of digital platform algorithms exacerbates this challenge, as marketers have little control over these essential tools. It is not only the consumer that is scrutinised in marketing data but the work of the marketer themselves is being constantly measured; 'We have to justify every penny' (M8, Marketing Manager, Conference firm).

Digital tools and social media platforms are becoming integral to daily marketing practices, but their effectiveness depends on their level of integration with marketing activities. Achieving full integration requires careful navigation of boundaries between tools and entities, demanding leadership and time investment. Dashboarding emerges as a method to facilitate this integration.

To conceptually illustrate these findings, we've developed a model using the metaphor of a pinwheel. It highlights how digitalized marketers' agency emerges at the intersection of strategy- and data-driven marketing, influenced by markets, platforms, and peer networks. Various forms of boundary work mediate agency expansion or restriction. 'Prosthetic agencing work' seeks to adapt the individual to the environment of digital marketing, so that action is possible within that particular environment. On the contrary, 'Habilitative agencing work' denotes configuration of the environment enabling – here, the marketer – to construct the specific agencements that allow the conceptualisation, design and implementation of their projects and set aims.

This paper contributes to the development of marketing theory in two important ways: 1) We offer a novel conceptualisation of agencing as boundary work in the formation of new market actors at the boundaries of emerging markets, wherein prosthetic and habilitative agencing work are acting in both competing and complementary ways; and 2) we identify the 'market for digitalised marketing' which we see as a key device in the agencing of contemporary marketing work. This serves to highlight the heretofore understudied role of markets in the shaping of marketing actors and not just how marketing is shaping markets.

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