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Saving the social legitimacy of marketing

Creating a utopian sustainable future through the concerted use of marketing theory and practice

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Saving the social legitimacy of marketing: Creating a utopian sustainable future through the concerted use of marketing theory and practice

Abstract

Considering the climate crisis, critical marketing literature warns that the social legitimacy of marketing is at stake. Drawing upon the idea of imagined futures, we advance the notion that marketing can save its legitimacy by envisioning and “selling” the conditions of a sustainable future reality to society—as utopian.

Introduction

In recent years, the climate crisis has become top of mind for consumers, marketer and marketing researchers, the world over. The field of marketing is seen as complicit in the current crisis for its role in creating demand and promoting overconsumption and waste (Kilbourne et al., 1997; Pereira Heath & Chatzidakis, 2012; Piper, 2021). And the once-small stream of marketing researchers concerned about marketing’s role in ecological calamity (e.g. Fisk, 1973; Kilbourne, 2004; Prothero & Fitchett, 2000) has grown rapidly in recent years. Contemporary critical marketing and consumption scholars have critiqued the concept of business sustainability (Bradshaw & Zwick 2016), questioned whether consumer culture can ever be environmentally sustainable (Borland & Lindgreen, 2013; Carrington et al., 2016; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014) and argued that the idea of sustainable consumption has been, at best, a failure (Cluley & Dunne, 2012; Coffin & Egan–Wyer,

2022) and, at worst, a fantasy that has distracted us from making the systemic changes needed to safeguard human existence on planet earth (Carrington et al., 2016).

Ahlberg, Coffin & Hietanen (2022, p. 669) introduce the term “terminal marketing” to express the “inevitable, incurable, and the grave” mood of the increasing number of critical marketing scholars who refuse to temper their “uncomfortable and unpalatable” conclusions about the excesses of contemporary consumer culture by offering solutions (even partial) to the current crisis. They contrast this mood with the work of scholars that are described as utopian optimists (Cova et al., 2013; Maclaran & Brown, 2001; Sherry, 2013) because of their belief in “progressive potential for change *within* consumer culture itself” (Ahlberg et al., 2022, p. 669). If believing that reformative change within the current capitalist economic system, driven by individuals will solve the climate crisis, is utopian, then this manuscript leans decidedly towards the dystopian.

Reflecting on the “depressive” state of critical marketing, in his (2022) think piece, Coffin asks how critical marketing might be made more optimistic. In this manuscript, we draw upon the idea of imagined futures to suggest that marketing can “sell” the conditions of a (dystopian?), post-capitalist, sustainable future to society as a utopian project. We argue that, not only is this a way to create a sustainable future but also a way for marketing to rehabilitate and relegitimise itself. The mood described as terminal marketing is pessimistic in nature. Ahlberg et al. suggest that critical marketing researchers resist the temptation to engender hope in the future by presenting solutions to the challenges we are facing. They argue that “there is a need to go through marketing first before any imagination beyond it seems likely” (2022, p.669). We, on the other hand, are optimistic about the possibility for marketing to have a more important social role. We are dystopian optimists if you will.

Marketing and sustainability

Building on the two opposing (?) moods outlined by Ahlberg et al—terminal marketing and utopian optimism—we suggest that the field of marketing and sustainability can be fruitfully divided into four models of thought. We illustrate these models of thought (perhaps unsurprisingly) in a four-fielder with dystopian-utopian on one axis and pessimism-optimism on the other (see figure 1).

The vertical axis

Utopian, here, refers to the implicit belief in the ability of consumers to make ethical and sustainable choices and of producers to satisfy consumers without causing harm (Bahl et al., 2016; Casey et al., 2020; Davis et al., 2016) (e.g. Bahl et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2021 – check these refs and add others). In other words, the belief that reform of the existing capitalist economic system is possible and can be done in such a way that it will deliver us from the worst effects of climate change. Dystopian, on the other end of the axis, denotes the belief encapsulated in the mood of terminal marketing (Ahlberg et al., 2022; see also, Borland & Lindgreen, 2013; Bradshaw & Zwick, 2016; Carrington et al., 2016; Coffin & Egan-Wyer, 2022; W. Kilbourne et al., 1997; McDonagh & Prothero, 2014) that radical and transformative system change is what is required to ensure human survival on earth¹. The Latin “dys” prefix in dystopian means bad (Vocabulary, n.d.) and dystopian futures are typically imagined to imply great suffering. However, they are also typically constructed as post-apocalyptic, and it is this aspect of dystopia that we play up here when we talk about what will come after the capitalist economic “utopia” ends².

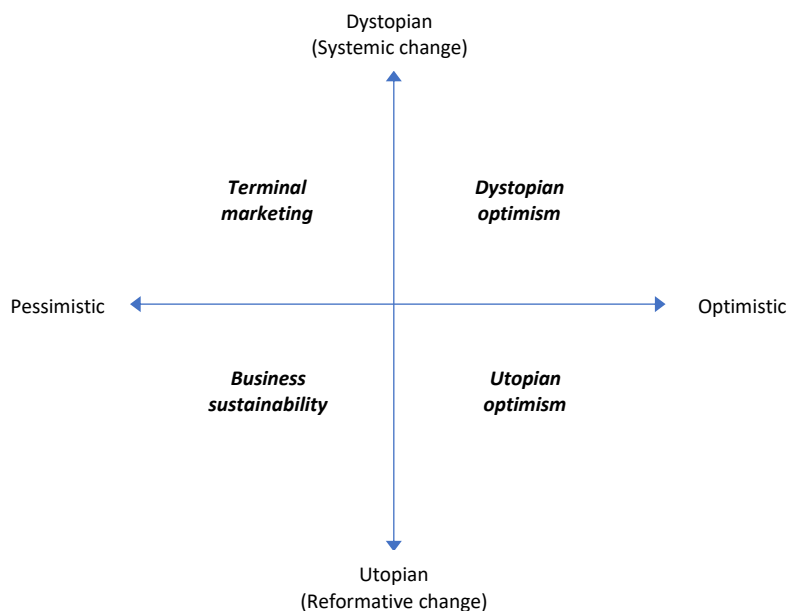
¹ Although Ahlberg et al. (2022, p. 678) suggest that terminal marketing “resists falling foul of both the utopian *and* dystopian as a form of teleological therapy,” we suggest that in opposing terminal marketing to utopian optimism, they define themselves as dystopian. I.e., they believe that transformative, system change is necessary.

² It has been widely speculated that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism (Fisher, 2009). We might well imagine, then, that it will take an apocalypse to bring about the transformative changes to our economic system that are needed to effectively fight climate change.

The horizontal axis

The pessimism-optimism axis denotes one's willingness to offer potential solutions to the crisis at hand. Terminal marketing studies are characterised by “a lack of therapeutic resolutions” (Ahlberg et al. 2022, p.?) often suggested by more mainstream marketing studies, as well as by business sustainability practitioners themselves. For example, more information for consumers (Longo et al., 2019), better labelling (Hanss & Böhm, 2012) to help them make better, more sustainable choices.

Figure 1: four models of thought



In the bottom right-hand quadrant, we find the model of thought that Ahlberg et al. describe as **utopian optimism**. At the extreme of this model of thought, individuals are agentic and consumers are sovereign, driving change via boycotts and boycotts while producers are open to progressive ways of working that reduce harms of all kinds. There is potential for solving the climate crisis within the current capitalist economic system culture by tweaking the reward mechanisms, the technology etc. Since, it is argued, there is no business on a dead planet, is it in the interests of all actors within a capitalist economic system to solve the climate crisis effectively. And with the right

reward mechanisms, it will naturally occur. Many mainstream marketing scholars would probably subscribe to this model of thought. As would tech optimists, who believe in the power of carbon capture technology as a potential solution to the climate crisis,

In the bottom left-hand quadrant, we find the model of thought of **business sustainability practitioners**. Like the (adjacent) utopian optimists, they believe in the potential of the current capitalist economic system to generate solutions to the climate crisis—perhaps with some small tweaks—and are, hence, utopian. They typically also provided ideas and templates for how this could work. Examples include the circular economy, an “ideologically questionable notion” that now appears much less promising than its advocates claim it to be (Corvellec et al., 2022, p. 421). However, while their willingness to provide solutions may make them appear to be optimists, Bradshaw and Zwick (2016) draw our attention to the fact that the practitioners found in this quadrant are, in fact, pessimists. Their refusal to see reality as it really is, their fetishistic disavowal of reality, belies an “unconscious desire for sabotage and annihilation” (Bradshaw and Zwick 2016, p.269). This is effectively a pessimistic standpoint because it results in no effective solutions being offered. “In its sincere aspiration to rescue the planet’s ecology, business sustainability constitutes an act of resistance to the realization of that very same objective” (Bradshaw and Zwick 2016, p.270).

The top left-hand quadrant is home to the dark, destructive model of thought that Ahlberg et al. (2022) describe as **terminal marketing**. Those finding themselves here are dystopian in that they believe in the necessity of systemic change to solve the climate crisis but are pessimistic regarding the efficacy of solutions, at least those that come from within mainstream marketing—such as consumer-led resolutions or awareness-raising activities Ahlberg et al (2022, p.670).

The top right-hand quadrant, we argue, is currently rather sparsely inhabited. It is here that we position the model of thought that we expound in this manuscript, **dystopian optimism**. It is dystopian, according to our contextual definition of the word, in that we argue that radical, transformative change of the current capitalist economic system is required to impact the climate crisis in any meaningful way. But it is also optimistic because we suggest that mainstream marketing researchers and practitioners can and should be involved in creating and selling the post-apocalyptic future that we must inhabit. We submit that it is via this dystopian-optimistic model of thought that marketing has the potential to reinvigorate and relegitimise itself. The job of marketing, in this model of thought, is to create a utopian vision of this dystopian, sustainable, post-capitalist, (post-growth?) future—a future that people do not yet realise that they want. This after all is the core of marketing, manufacturing a desire for something that consumers are not yet aware that they want or need. To explicate how this could transpire, we turn to our theoretical lens.

Imagining futures: Envisioning an alternative yet desirable future

In arguing for and explicating how the field of marketing may contribute to a more sustainable world (or even to aid in solving the climate crisis) by “marketing/selling” the positive aspects of a post-capitalist future to make such as desirable reality happen, we draw upon the notion of imagined futures, and the reality-constitutive dimension of theory.

Previous literature on imagined futures puts forth that managers, organizations and workers strive to create credible images to shape a particular future through them (Beckert and Bronk, 2018; Beckert and Suckert, 2021). In Beckert’s (2016) terms, imagined futures generate “fictional expectations”, which performatively structure the current decisions and actions of organizations, investors, consumers, employees, regulators and courts (Beckert, 2021; Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2020; Oomen, Hoffman, and Hajer, 2021). As such, imagined futures become performative in the present (Oomen et al., 2021), which implies that a certain type of desirable future (e.g., an ecologically

sustainable and post-growth world) may be created or made through (marketing) practitioners envisioning of that future - via the *collective* use of visual, discursive, and material representations (Thompson and Byrne, 2022).

Creating a desirable future through theorization

Most recent literature on the creation of desirable futures, coming foremost from the field of organizational- and management studies, suggest that research from the social sciences should take an active role in the co-creation and shaping of a desired, even utopian future reality by developing theoretical representations of the conditions of such a reality (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022; Wenzel, Krämer, Koch, and Reckwitz, 2021). Although the idea that theory harbours constitutional and performative dimensions, not only preceding but also creating a future empirical reality is not entirely new – it was introduced by the postmodern thinker Baudrillard (1994) in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* – the novelty here rather lies in the notion that social researchers ought to consciously and intentionally form theories that would create a certain yet desirable future reality.

The task of theorizing to create desirable futures Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022) argue, are not only a plausible and probable, but also a desirable activity by which social research can really make a difference, and to regain its societal meaning and relevance in comparison to future-predictions generated by giant tech companies' big data research methods. These authors forward that instead of extrapolating to future conditions of the world from the current present, what is required instead is research guiding normative ideas of the future. Here the purpose would be to create new future visions –supported by theory – which would open radically novel possibilities for people to shape the world.

However, to be successful, this endeavour requires novel yet rigorous scientific methods to study and theorize a future reality that does not already exist. Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022) introduce two main methods for the theorization of a desired future. One is to study *real utopias*, which in the words of Wright (2010, p. 3) exist on the boundary line between ‘dreams and practice’. These utopias involve the development of future yet alternate visions of prevalent institutions. They are also real in that they are embedded in present potentialities; existing in the fringes of the mainstream, they (alternative forms of organizing, such as ecological, and social collectives, cooperatives, and communities), show what could be possible on a small scale (Gümüşay and Reinecke, 2022). Social researchers may then co-create social change towards a desirable future by theorizing and legitimizing the occurrence of the above peripheral yet existing potentialities.

The second method, as proposed by Gümüşay and Reinecke (2022), is to accomplish societal change through acts of imagination of a desired future. This would entail abilities and practices for how to create images in peoples’ mind of things that cannot be immediately felt or that has not so far been perceived: the unreal, irreal, and surreal. Imagining here then implies making the absent present.

A third avenue towards making a desirable future has been opened up by Thompson and Byrne (2022) who demonstrated that the creation of a desirable future is contingent upon a variety of practitioners’ everyday practical knowledge for how to: formulate conjectures of the future, making those conjectures visible, and arranging the individual conjectures into a meaningful whole. The making of a desirable future through the formulation of the above conjectures entails the concerted use of both discursive, visual, and material artefacts.

Despite sparse use within marketing literature, we argue that the ideas of imaginary futures and the reality-constituting dimension of theory offers a novel and inspirational approach to how marketing

theory and practice may be mobilized to not only create a desirable future reality signified by post-growth and ecologically sustainability, but also to save the social legitimacy of the entire marketing field as such. In the following section, we will outline possible theorizations and actions that marketing scholars and practitioners may engage in to envision, imagine, and thereby create/make a more desirable future for society and for the planet.

What might a utopian dystopia look like?

For the last 70 years or more, marketing has used discursive, visual, and material artefacts to encourage us to imagine that more, newer products will make us content. In the dystopian optimism model of thought, marketing theory and practice may be mobilized along new principles to “sell” us the benefits of a sustainable, post-capitalist future.

New principles for organising production, consumption and/or investment might be envisioned.

These ideas are not yet fully developed but might include:

- craft orientation instead of mass production.
- minimalism and ascetism instead of mass consumption.
- co-optition instead of competition.
- services rather than goods (typically less resource intensive).
- local instead of global production, distribution, and consumption.
- a focus on relationships and experiences—more memorable and enduring—rather than products—which give temporary pleasure and lead to a cycle of desire.

Discussion & Conclusion

To answer Coffin's (2022) call for ways in which critical marketing might be made more optimistic, in this manuscript, we play with the ideas of utopian and dystopian. Instead of taking the word dystopian to mean bad, or to imply suffering, we take it to mean post-apocalyptic or post-capitalist and suggest how such transformative change might be brought about via the imaginative actions of marketing researchers and practitioners.

Embracing dystopian optimism implies selling a new vision of radical transformation, which is both dystopian—in that it is about the end/destruction of the current economic system—and utopian in that it involves creating a utopic vision of a post-capitalist society. In so doing, marketing has the possibility to re-legitimize and rehabilitate itself by using its competence to envision and enact more desirable future for society and for the planet.

The ideas in this manuscript are at the early stages of development but we envisage that, by playing with the ideas of utopia and dystopia, optimism and pessimism, we might contribute to discussions about the role of critical marketing and sustainability by (1) categorising the mainstream and critical marketing sustainability literature in novel and interesting ways; (2) bringing in the theory of imagined futures as a way to enact future realities; (3) suggesting ways in which both of these can be accomplished by both marketing practitioners and scholars; and (4) explicating how marketing may assist in saving the planet while simultaneously re-legitimizing itself as field of theory and practice. This, however, needs to be a systematic and concerted effort.

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