Original Research Article

Manipulate to empower: Hyper-relevance and the contradictions of marketing in the age of surveillance capitalism

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how digital marketers think about marketing in the age of Big Data surveillance, automatic computational analyses, and algorithmic shaping of choice contexts. Our starting point is a contradiction at the heart of digital marketing namely that digital marketing brings about unprecedented levels of consumer empowerment and autonomy *and* total control over and manipulation of consumer decision-making. We argue that this contradiction of digital marketing is resolved via the notion of relevance, which represents what Fredric Jameson calls a symbolic act. The notion of the symbolic act lets us see the centering of relevance as a creative act of digital marketers who undertake to symbolically resolve a contradiction that cannot otherwise be resolved. Specifically, we suggest that relevance allows marketers to believe that in the age of surveillance capitalism, the manipulation of choice contexts and decision-making is the same as consumer empowerment. Put differently, relevance is the moment when marketing manipulation disappears and all that is left is the empowered consumer. To create relevant manipulations that are experienced as empowering by the consumer requires always-on surveillance, massive analyses of consumer data and hyper-targeted responses, in short, a persistent marketing presence. The vision of digital marketing is therefore a fascinating one: marketing disappears at precisely the moment when it extends throughout the life without limit.

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Introduction

Over the last number of years, the transition from non-digital to digital marketing[1] has been said to mark a shift from asymmetrical modes of communication and manipulation to symmetrical modes of co-creation and prosumption (Cova and Dalli, 2009; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). However, digital marketing has become increasingly reliant on Big Data (Zuboff, 2015) and "environmental surveillance" practices (Andrejevic, 2017), which provide the proprietors of data with hitherto unimaginable abilities to see the market (Fourcade and Healy, 2017), predict and manipulate behaviors, and address consumers at a highly personalized level (Cheney-Lippold, 2017; Prey, 2017; Turow, 2011). There is thus a fascinating contradiction at the heart of contemporary marketing theory and practice with these coexisting claims of

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unprecedented consumer empowerment (Füller et al., 2009; Pires et al., 2006) alongside the indignant claims about the almost complete loss of consumer privacy, agency, and sovereignty (Ball et al., 2016; Mittelstadt et al., 2016; Nemorin and Gandy, 2017; Yeung, 2017). The vast majority of contributions on either side of this debate take as their starting and end point the effect of marketing technological transformations on the consumer subject (i.e., is she empowered or powerless, in control of her actions or controlled by the algorithm?, etc.). However, in this article we wish to explore this contradiction of digital marketing not from the point of view of the consumer but from the perspective of the digital marketing practitioner. Digital marketers know, of course, that the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing practice is enhanced dramatically by current and emerging technologies of consumer surveillance and consumer decision-making control (Manovich, 2018; Yeung, 2017). At the same time, marketers understand that marketing practice has come under critical scrutiny for its growing ability to manipulate consumers' beliefs and choices. Therefore, the task of digital marketers is to find a way that allows for the further intensification of consumer surveillance, manipulation, and control while appearing to do the exact opposite.

In this article, we argue that while digital marketing managers are aware of the debate about the two sides of data-driven marketing, consumer empowerment on the one hand and consumer manipulation and choice control on the other, they construct a narrative that allows them to resolve the contradiction. Empowerment here is understood in somewhat simplistic terms as the optimization of the marketplace's dual logic: more control over the process of choosing on the one hand, and the ability to make better choices on the other. The narrative put forward by digital marketers suggests that the true empowerment of consumers in fact requires the algorithmic manipulation and modulation of consumers' decision-making. Central to this narrative is the notion of (hyper-)relevance (Wollan et al., 2017), which functions as a symbolic act that resolves symbolically this contradiction at the heart of digital marketing. The story goes like this: relevance is what consumers want from marketers and marketers want to provide. For marketers to be relevant to consumers they need to know consumers, interact with consumers at a highly intimate level, and control the communication and consumption environment.

In this article, we develop the argument that marketers use (hyper-)relevance to resolve symbolically a contradiction that cannot be resolved in reality. Namely, the better marketing becomes at manipulating consumer choice environments and decision-making, the more powerful consumers become. From this perspective, the constant improvements in technologies of consumer surveillance (e.g., Zuboff, 2015), automated data processing (Manovich, 2018), and algorithmic decision-guidance techniques (e.g., Yeung, 2017) are not a threat to consumer power and autonomy, but their condition of possibility. As such, in the age of surveillance marketing digital marketers present a fairytale vision of marketing where the algorithmic manipulation of consumers and consumer autonomy and empowerment become one and the same.

Surveillance capitalism and the logic of digital marketing

Our analysis of digital marketing practice is situated in the context of what Zuboff (2015) terms surveillance capitalism, which is characterized by the logic of creating, collecting, manipulating, and valorizing information. The goal of surveillance capitalism is the totalization of reality *as* data reality, always accessible, always knowable and always changeable, as digital marketers use Big Data practices to "predict and modify human behavior to produce revenue and market control" (Zuboff, 2015: 75; see also Lyon, 2014). Zuboff's outlook is a bleak one, and paints a picture of a future under surveillance capitalism in which (2015: 84–85, emphasis added):

> [A] global architecture of computer mediation turns the electronic text of the bounded organization into an intelligent world-spanning organism that I call Big Other. New possibilities of subjugation are produced as this innovative institutional logic thrives on unexpected and illegible mechanisms of extraction and control *that exile persons from their own behavior.*

Such critiques of the effects of dataveillance and Big Data analytics are not new. Elmer (2004), drawing on Deleuze, and Lazzarato (2014) both make similar observations about the machinic enslavement of subjectivity by cybernetic assemblages. In addition, Beer and Burrows (2013) and Ruppert (2012) offer somewhat more tangible accounts of how databases create data profiles of individuals and subject them to modulated control measures (see also Zwick and Dholakia, 2004). However, today the essence of surveillance capitalism is the individualized modulations of commercial relationships between business and consumers. Once the market can be seen as an assemblage of individuals (see also Fourcade and Healy, 2017), or as in Zuboff's (2019: 377) evocative words, "organisms that behave", then marketers can attempt to manage individualized consumer subjects at scale through automated marketing experiments, such as quick modulations of product formats, pricing, content, channels of communication,

and so on. Hence, holding on to a distinction between some authentic forms of behavior and forms of behavior that are algorithmically managed and controlled by data capitalists (including a host of data-driven digital marketers) becomes increasingly difficult, if not impossible (Yeung, 2017).

Tufekci (2014) and Yeung (2017) suggest that digital marketing is based on increasingly sophisticated decision-making technologies which enable marketers to shape instantly and persistently the choice contexts in which consumers make choices. The technologies used are often automated, based on algorithmic decision-guidance techniques, and create specific links between data from many sources that otherwise would not be combinable (such as consumer search and purchasing histories, products, population, brands, etc.; e.g., n.d.a.). Moreover, these technologies establish recursive learning cycles, where every action performed by a consumer is, in the words of Google chief economist Hal Varian, "considered a signal to be analyzed and fed back into the system" (in Zuboff, 2019: 69). Thaler and Sunstein (2008) suggest that once customer databases are combined with the ability to manipulate the decision-making context (i.e., when the marketer has a plethora of important consumer data to hand and has designed the consumer choice context) then the marketer can "nudge" the consumer in preferred directions by presenting her with a custom-built choice set. As Yeung (2017: 118) points out, the nudge is "a particular form of choice architecture that alters people's behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives … [and] constitute[s] a 'soft' form of design-based control." For Yeung some nudges are relatively innocuous, such as a nudge to encourage healthy eating by placing the salad in front of the lasagna. The main focus of her analysis however is "Big Data analytic nudges" or hypernudges. These are facilitated by high-level computational marketing analytic techniques and are "extremely powerful and potent due to their networked, continuously updated, dynamic and pervasive nature (hence 'hypernudge')" (Yeung, 2017: 118), which can create in "real-time" hyper-targeted consumer realities and choice frameworks. Bilić (2016, 2018) explores this ability to manipulate choice through the context of Google, which, through its opaque algorithms, exert a pervasive influence as it "defines human experience on the Internet by displaying, editing and recommending certain information for certain groups of people" (Bilić, 2018: 318). In this world of algorithmic individuation (Prey, 2017), every consumer's reality online is a unique one, created by marketers like Google, Spotify, Netflix, Apple, and Amazon through their ability to capture, channel and

manage the consumer's interaction with the algorithmic "machine".

This "reality making" is akin to "performativit[ies] of circulation" (MacKenzie, 2005: 81), where consumers find themselves within cybernetic loops that blur the boundaries between autonomous consumer decision-making and, to use Foucault's suggestive terminology, algorithmic "conduct of conduct". While a performativity of circulation of data has always existed (Schwarzkopf, 2015), contemporary digital marketers' unquenchable thirst for data allied to the marketing technological infrastructure's ability to always better capture and process this data means "this circulation has accelerated, the data has hypermultiplied and the connections and linkages forged have been beyond any previous comprehension" (Beer and Burrows, 2013: 67). Consider the ability of a music streaming service Spotify to personalize a user's listening experience through algorithmic individuation (Prey, 2017; see also Lury and Day, 2019). Business pundits celebrate services such as Spotify for their innovative approach to Big Data, artificial intelligence, and machine learning, with their algorithms and machines trained to instantly and continuously surveil and process consumer acts to continually enhance their listening experiences (e.g., Marr, 2017). Every Spotify user profile erects a unique choice context adapted specifically to this user based on their music preferences, listening habits, moods, and other identifiers (Peterson, 2015). When the manipulation of the choice context is adapted uniquely to each user based on previous preferences, behaviors, perceived emotional states, and more, then future searches, playlists, and listening choices become highly dependent on the environment created by the service. Of course, it bears noting that this leader in what critics would call consumer manipulation through surveillance, automated data processing, and algorithmic decision-guidance techniques (e.g., Ball et al., 2016; Yeung, 2017) is also the clear leader in the music industry with 50 million-plus paying subscribers (Richter, 2019). Spotify allows a consumer to feel they are in control of their listening experience even as the Spotify machine co-creates and co-controls it. To digital marketers this suggests that algorithmically guided decision-making is not the opposite of consumer autonomy (Ball et al., 2016; Bilić, 2018; Prey, 2017; Yeung, 2017), but its condition of possibility.

In this article, we suggest that any critique of the emerging surveillance capitalism and surveillance-based marketing (such as Zuboff's and Yeung's, for example) would be enriched by developing an understanding of how the logic of digital marketing is premised on collapsing the distinction between autonomy and manipulation, rather than assuming the validity of the distinction. We claim that there is a contradiction

at the heart of digital marketing that digital marketers must resolve. In this contradiction data-driven, automated and algorithmically governed marketing at once manipulates and enslaves as well as empowers and liberates the consumer. We propose that digital marketers use the notion of relevance, or as consulting company Accenture puts it, hyper-relevance (Wollan et al., 2017), as a symbolic act to resolve this contradiction (Jameson, 1981). Importantly, this resolution is not real. The symbolic act functions by creating a fiction where no resolution can occur in the real world (cf. Fry, 2012: 236). Like in a fairytale, the symbolic act produces a fantasy in which two things that do not belong together co-exist—the Prince and the Pauper, the Beauty and the Beast (cf. Fry, 2012). Put differently, the notion of relevance has come to fulfill a specific function in contemporary marketing practice and to explore relevance as a symbolic act means to ask what this act allows contemporary marketers to do.

The point of such an analysis is not to determine whether hyper-relevance may or may not be real or fully achievable in the era of data-driven, automated marketing. Instead, our focus is on exploring why digital marketers desire hyper-relevance to be real? In the final analysis, we propose that it is through the notion of relevance that digital marketers are able to envision a future of marketing where the fundamental contradiction at the heart of marketing is finally resolved: using ubiquitous surveillance technologies and automated data processing to control consumer decision-making *means* empowering consumers. As we push our analysis to its logical conclusion, we propose the concept of *post-marketing* to express the paradoxical idea that a world of ubiquitous, networked and always-on marketing manipulation is how digital marketers envision a future without marketing. In other words, in their vision the practice of marketing disappears at precisely the moment when marketing inserts itself completely into the fabric of daily life.

In the next section, we first discuss briefly the world of digital marketing practitioners who together are building a specific vision of digital marketing. Then we explore in detail how digital marketing practitioners create relevance as symbolic act to resolve the contradiction between manipulating/controlling and empowering consumers. Finally, we offer the notion of post-marketing to explore the curious belief of digital marketers that once consumers are fully embedded in ubiquitous, cybernetic marketing networks, then marketing as it is conventionally understood will come to an end.

Building a vision of marketing (together)

Digital marketing, when compared to pre-digital forms of marketing, can both broaden the scope of marketers' reach by transcending barriers such as geography and time zones to connect with a far wider audience, while at the time narrow its focus by allowing marketers to understand every consumer at a granular level and tailor offerings with "laser-like" precision (Ryan, 2017). On one level, digital marketing is characterized by exponential changes in technologies that have completely redrawn the boundaries and recast relations between marketers and consumers, marketers and marketers, consumer themselves, and now even between technology-enabled objects (Yadav and Pavlou, 2014). Yet while digital marketing revolves around rapid technology innovations, from fixed to mobile devices, from dialup to 5G, from basic to hyper-efficient consumer surveillance, from inert to communicating devices, and so forth, more than anything it is about marketers adopting an entirely different philosophy of marketing (Dean, 2010).

Pre-digital marketing represents an old, corporate, top-down, mass version of marketing. It entailed a one-to-many relationship between marketer and consumers, in terms of the value proposition offered by the marketer to commercial messaging and channels of communication used. Marketers sought control and predictability; to understand their consumer habits, wants, and motivations; divide them into relatively rudimentary segments using the tools available; and then manage the rest of their (relatively stable) marketing operations around reaching and satisfying consumers within those segments (e.g., Fisher and Smith, 2011). Digital marketing, in contrast represents a different view of marketing. It is a view that favors decentralization over centralization, the multitude over the unified, bottom-up consumer-driven power over top-down authority and control, and iterative experimentation over the planned (Dean, 2010). Today a successful digital marketer is one who is flexible, collaborative, can engage their consumers and generate, share, and monetize abundant information (e.g., Solis, 2010; Stratten, 2012; Wedel and Kannan, 2016). For consumers, changes in technology afforded them opportunities to be ever more social, engaged, interactive, and productive (Arvidsson and Colleoni, 2012; Solis, 2010). Consumers came to be seen as increasingly empowered, self-directed actors who use their tremendous creative and intellectual resources to communicate in new ways, collaborate, develop new ideas, and generally make and do many interesting and innovative things. Marketing thinkers quickly recast these qualities for marketing purposes. They coined multiple buzzwords such as crowdsourcing, prosumption, mass collaboration, peer production, user generation, and so on, all of which are to be enabled and encouraged to allow savvy marketers to harness the data and value these produce (see e.g., Cova and

Dalli, 2009; Hong and Chen, 2013; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Zwick et al., 2008). So while digital marketers still involve themselves in tasks familiar to traditional marketers such as locating and identifying consumers, endeavoring to know the minutiae of their lives, and choosing effective messages, they do so knowing that what consumers truly want is their help in cultivating ways of consuming, producing, and being that fits specifically with who they are. In this section, we turn our attention to different types of digital marketer and the digital marketing ecosystem in which they operate and interact.

The digital marketing industry is made up of hundreds of thousands of companies offering an astonishing array of different leading-edge marketing services and products. These help to solve specific contemporary marketing problems such as locating and identifying valuable customers, real-time microtargeting, personalized marketing automation, measuring effects of marketing campaigns and so on. We suggest that a useful way of thinking about these different digital marketing companies is to place them in one of two categories: what we could call market seekers and market finders. Market seekers include the ranks of product and brand managers, CXD managers, and marketing practitioners more generally who are on the constant lookout for some edge in their hypercompetitive market spaces. They are always looking to improve in areas such as target customer identification, marketing communication, new product development, selling, and servicing. Market finders are companies that offer hardware- and software-based products and services that promise to help market seekers with their objectives. Like their market seeking customers, market finders operate in dynamic and intensely competitive markets spaces with the number and types of analytics companies rapidly growing. Market finders compete with, and differentiate themselves from, other market finders through claims of technological and analytical superiority. In this sense, market finders are what are called analytical competitors (Degli Esposti, 2014). These include data mining and analytics companies, data brokers, digital and programmatic advertising companies, and market intelligence and consumer insights companies, all of whom employ automated monitoring, detection, and profiling to generate digital 'data doubles' (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Manzerolle and Smeltzer, 2010). For market seekers, a great deal of excitement and enthusiasm originates from the fact that these market finders appear to be able to refine and enhance the tools for ubiquitous customer surveillance, identification, and interaction. This they do by combining ever more advanced skills in data storage, algorithmic audience management, processing, and deployment to dissolve the inefficient

mass market into individuated data expressions (Lury and Day, 2019; Prey, 2017). Indeed, market finders seek to differentiate their services from those of competitors by pointing out the ways that their particular mode of individuating and seeing the customer is superior to that of other companies. Much hinges on persuading potential clients that the quality of their particular modes and technologies of customer surveillance and automatic computational data analysis and response yield more accurate and actionable insights for the market seeker, who is looking for ever more speed, accuracy, and relevance in its interactions with customers (Manovich, 2018).

What separates this ubiquitous, always-on capturing and processing of consumer data from previous, non-interactive modes of knowing the customer is the fact that consumer identities are now in a constant state of being updated (e.g., Wollan et al., 2017). Market finders are quick to tout their ability to capture and know these dynamic movements and offer suggestions for relevant marketing responses (Chun, 2016; Zwick and Denegri-Knott, 2009). What these market finders are offering, through the capture of behavioral data, is a consumer profile and history free of gaps with the goal of "creating as complete an archive as possible and using this as a means of projecting into the future" (Andrejevic, 2016: 27). The challenge for seekers and finders is to ensure that the projections into the future, often the immediate future, are accurate so that the (often immediate and increasingly automated) marketing response (a product alternative?, a specific price point?, an ad?, etc.) is perceived as relevant by the target. To eradicate irrelevance and to achieve extreme relevance, hyper-relevance in Accenture's vernacular, is therefore what ties all digital marketing participants together.

For digital marketers talk about relevance is everywhere. It emerges as the grand new marketing vision towards which buyers and sellers of digital marketing technologies appear to be working together. Acxiom, for example, a leading broker of consumer data, helps market seekers "deliver value through relevance and timeliness" by helping them "understand consumers and create actionable marketing data" (Acxiom, 2015). Consumers are continuously interacting with online media, digital payment systems, loyalty card systems, and other elements of the sensor society—the Internet of Things, "smart" things such as cars, phones, watches, thermostats, etc. (Hoffman and Novak, 2017)—characteristic of the contemporary distributed surveillant assemblage (Haggerty and Ericson, 2000; Pridmore and Lyon, 2011). In so doing they enable a market finder like Acxiom to build massive behavioral data archives that can be used for highly targeted and personalized marketing activities (Stephens, 2017). Consumers' manifold activities and non-activities,

clicks and non-clicks, movements and inertia are continuously captured and coded by automated passive surveillance, rendering the consumer into actionable *data signatures* (Anderson, 2011; Andrejevic, 2017). Indeed, to Acxiom consumer data are considered "data assets" that Acxiom will help the client to "monetize" (Acxiom, n.d.a). A primary selling point to this end is Acxiom's "Open Garden", a marketing and advertising ecosystem that is connected at the data layer, so it allows all sources and suppliers of data (every platform, device and channel) to coalesce around a single unified view of the customer. Consumer data have become so abundant yet scattered across multiple sources, devices, and platforms that Acxiom's Open Garden is presented as a leading-edge surveillance apparatus insomuch as these dispersed and discrete data assets can be aggregated in one place for the market seeker client to use. As Acxiom state in their sales pitch, "[t]his is a golden age for marketers with a huge range of technologies that help you engage consumers, measure results, and optimize. Now you can build a ruthlessly efficient, symbiotic marketing ecosystem that delivers an unobstructed view of every customer—from any channel" (Acxiom: n.d.b). The job of the market seeker is to decide how to engage and how to optimize the engagement—in short, how to be relevant—and only a complete customer data signature provides the basis for relevant engagement without the noise and waste characteristic of conventional marketing.

Or consider Microsoft, which acquired LinkedIn in 2016 to better access existing markets and to find new ones. Explaining the $26.2 billion acquisition to investors, Microsoft CEO Satya Narayana Nadella stated: "This can drive targeting and relevance to the next level" (in Zuboff, 2019: 165). Nadella does not explain what he means by "relevance". Simply invoking the term seems enough to justify to investors the billions spent on data collector and processor LinkedIn. The bet Nadella and the investors are making is that LinkedIn has the potential to deliver relevance because at its core, LinkedIn is a surveillance company. Relevance, in turn, has the potential to deliver significant revenues (what Zuboff refers to as 'surveillance revenues') because consumers prefer targeted and meaningful interactions even if these interactions are based on LinkedIn's and Microsoft's surveillance. Therefore, in the age of surveillance capitalism, relevance becomes such a suggestive idea, and to CEOs and investors an irresistible one, because it suggests to them a world—correctly or not—where consumers choose those companies that excel in surveillance and automated, targeted decision-guidance techniques. In other words, relevance becomes the symbolic act that offers the possibility (or fantasy) to marketers that businesses and their customers want the same thing in the age of surveillance capitalism.

Understanding relevance

Much of the argument made in this article rests on the prevalence and importance of relevance in digital marketing, although we have yet to elaborate on how it is understood or how commonplace it is in marketing. Prominent management and marketing consultants tell us that marketing has entered a new "Relevance Era" (Zoratti and Gallagher, 2012: 30, see also Wollan et al., 2017), that digital marketers "know that relevance is critical" (Albee, 2015: 3), and admonish the industry to "start thinking about relevance" (Zeally et al., 2018). However, although it is a term of great importance to marketing practitioners, relevance remains a surprisingly unclear concept. Different definitions are offered by these management and marketing consultants, with some general consensus around elements that make certain marketing interventions more relevant to consumers than others. Wollan et al. (2017) show relevance to be based primarily on meaningfulness and personalization. Zeally et al. (2018) emphasize immediacy as to do relevant marketing means "serv[ing] a customer's most relevant needs *in the moment*." Similarly, Zoratti and Gallagher (2012: 29) suggest that a marketer is relevant when she reaches customers with the right message or offer in the right channel at the right time. Albee's (2015) understanding is more elaborate and she frames relevance as being first and foremost about context: about understanding and matching a customer's intentions or needs in relation to interactions or experiences in the moment. These various definitions prioritize a mélange of meaningfulness, personalization, and appropriateness, with marketers needing to connect with consumers contextually and at their precise moments of need or want (Albee, 2015; Zeally et al., 2018; Zoratti and Gallagher, 2012).

The polyvocality of relevance is in further evidence in marketing research scholarship. Although scholars discuss relevance at length, it is often defined in rather simple terms, if at all. Two notable exceptions are Varadarajan's (2003) exposition of managerial relevance and Zaichkowsky's (1985) of consumer relevance. Managerial relevance relates to the quality attributed to academic research so that it brings the worlds of marketing theory and practice together (e.g., Brennan and Ankers, 2004; Brownlie and Saren, 1997; Nenonen et al., 2017). Varadarajan (2003) shows that the relevance of research to marketing practitioners comes from a combination of descriptive relevance, goal relevance, operational validity, nonobviousness, and timeliness. Elsewhere, in her

definition of consumer relevance Zaichkowsky (1985) frames it as a feature of involvement, with a market offering relevant to consumers when their inherent needs, values, and interests are satisfied (Ardholdt et al., 2019; Eisenbeiss et al., 2014). Otherwise, consumer relevance is a fairly simple subjective measure of something's perceived personal importance to a consumer (e.g., Mollen and Wilson, 2010; Chan, 2019).

The purpose of our brief review is not to disentangle and then knit together these various strands of meaning to further the development of the relevance construct in (digital) marketing. Rather, we are mostly interested in the way relevance is constructed discursively by marketing practitioners and functions symbolically in the field of marketing practice, particularly those practitioners whose business models depend on the massive collection, mining, and use of customer data.[2] No one understands the contextual and time-sensitive nature of relevance better than Google. Google's business model depends in large part on its ability to monopolize the capture of the world's "I-Want-to-" micro-moments. As the company explains, a micro-moment is "an intent-rich moment when a person turns to a device to act on a need–to know, go, do, or buy." Google's expressed intention is to "anticipate" users' moments of needs and to "connect [users] to the answers they're looking for" (think with Google, 2016), with the ultimate goal, as explained by Google's Hal Varian to "know what you want and tell you before you ask the question" (Zuboff, 2019). Through the notion of the micro-moment, Google defines relevance as contingent, contextual, and ephemeral, where a consumer's every need, articulated and otherwise, is seamlessly catered for (see also Zeally et al., 2018).

Market finders are keenly aware of market seekers' desire to provide more relevant offerings to their consumers. Market finders (such as surveillance and analytics companies) therefore look to sell these market seekers on the promise of better data representations of consumers, which will enable them to achieve more accurately targeted, personalized, better timed, and more intelligent marketing actions. Alterian Inc. is one such market finder. It is one of many companies that tout patented algorithmic solutions that can quantify relevance and automate more relevant communications and operations. The company has built a patented "social media intelligence system" which calculates for each consumer a Customer Relevance Score (CRS). The CRS score is derived from capturing what consumers deem important enough to share on social media: "CRS quantifies how likely it is that a customer or social network user will share a particular piece of content, such as a video, an article, a website, or other online content within the context of a social network … because it can be demonstrated with empirical evidence that shared content increases revenue more than passive or unshared content" (Alterian, 2014). Thus, in the case of Alterian, relevance is operationalized as online engagement and participation in sharing activities and framed as lucrative to marketers. In short, marketers know that they are relevant when consumers interact with the messages, products, and services marketers provide. While the operating algorithm remains secret, market seekers learn that the score is the outcome of tracking consumers across multiple social media platforms, capturing demographic and behavioral data (including social media conversations, messages, posts, feeds, updates, shares, and statuses), and evaluating these data. Moreover, depending on the market seeker's preferences, consumers can be categorized either individually—algorithmic individuation (Prey, 2017)—or put into aggregates for multiple relevant interventions.

In order to become truly relevant means marketers must become what Karakayali et al. (2018) call "intimate experts," akin to a "concierge, butler or friend" (Zeally et al., 2018), who know precisely what consumers want and when they want it. To a market finder such as Accenture, intimacy is founded on trust as the consumer will best share the required level of data when they feel secure in the marketer's methods of data collection, use, and protection (Wollan et al., 2017). Importantly, the logic of surveillance capitalism changes the register of marketing intimacy; it means not just knowing a consumer's historical and present preferences, activities, locations, desires, communications and so on, but her future ones, too. From the perspective of digital marketers, then, intimacy becomes relevance when marketers manage to weave themselves so deeply into the daily fabric of consumers that the shaping of the consumer's future becomes a matter of co-production (Ritzer, 2015). To Accenture, the result of co-producing experiences with consumers is what they term "hyper-relevance," which means the surveillant marketer "like today's digital consumers—is always on, … dynamic, constantly changing and always available" (Wollan et al., 2017: 5). As Wollan et al. (2017: 5) put it, "companies that offer hyper-relevant experiences focus on understanding customers' needs in a given circumstance and the evolving context in which they make their purchase decisions." For Accenture's market seeker clients to become hyper-relevant demands that they put into action data capture that occurs at an ever-faster pace, on an exponentially expanding scale, and at greater levels of personal intimacy in every aspect of the customer's life.

[B]ecause the design of hyper-relevant experiences is based on a deep understanding of individual customers' motivations and contexts, traditional data gathered

from website visits, social media posts or previous purchasing histories is no longer sufficient. What's needed is information that is much more personal in nature. Realtime health data transmitted via wearable biometric technologies is one example. (Wollan et al., 2017: 6)

Managerially generated discussions about relevance reveal that digital marketers are more adept at explaining the need for persistent customer surveillance than they are at defining relevance. Judging from the explanations of Acxiom, Alterian, Google and Accenture, relevance is achieved whenever personally meaningful contextual interactivity between a consumer and her marketing environment is achieved. Clearly, the power of relevance in the symbolic construction of digital marketing does not flow from the clarity of the definition. Instead, as we elaborate in the following section, when a consumer's interactivity with her marketing environment becomes so specific and personally meaningful to her through ubiquitous surveillance and (hyper)relevance, it is as if marketing itself disappears for her in that moment.

Ubiquitous marketing as the end of marketing

The symbolic power of relevance is significant and for it to "work" as a symbolic act it does not need to be truly known or defined. What matters most is that the concept allows digital marketers to create a fiction that resolves a contradiction that otherwise cannot be resolved (Jameson, 1981). For relevance to fulfill this function, it is not necessary that this resolution of the contradiction is real, i.e. that hypernudging *really* creates more autonomy and that manipulation *really* empowers consumers. The point of an act that functions symbolically is precisely that it constructs a fantasy—a symbolic universe—where the co-existence of two opposites appears possible. In the universe of digital marketing, hyper-relevance brings together ubiquitous surveillance and algorithmic choice design on the one hand with autonomy and freedom of choice on the other; not as opposites but as complements that construct a perfect (albeit fairytale) world.

From the vantage point of digital marketers, a perfect world is achieved when consumers are embedded in highly personalized worlds that are algorithmically emptied of irrelevant choices. One could certainly argue that when marketers act as choice architects who create worlds for consumers (Charitis et al., 2018; Yeung, 2017) conventional notions of the rational, self-reflexive subject become harder to sustain. However, whether consumers mourn the loss of agency and rational self-determination is not clear. As Zuboff (2019) suggests, in the age of surveillance

capitalism consumers and investors richly reward digital marketers like Google and Facebook for their ambition to co-construct, if not entirely control, consumer rationality, and decision-making.

Through the figure of relevance, everyone is invited to this utopia where the world is more searchable, shopping more convenient, staying in touch with friends easier, cab rides more available and affordable, and so on. Digital marketing represents the promise of ubiquitous and perfect marketing where every new improvement in network optimization, consumer surveillance, automated response accuracy, user experience design, and environmental modulation is hailed as another step towards a world specifically designed for each consumer (Charitis et al., 2018). Paradoxically, this world of ubiquitous, always on marketing becomes, in the mind of digital marketers, a world *without* marketing; a post-marketing utopia where old forms of marketing—the disruptive, irrelevant and corporate kind—have been replaced by something new and different, still performed by marketers but no longer marketing. Grasping this vision of digital marketing as post-marketing allows us to appreciate fully the symbolic function of hyper-relevance as not only bringing together marketing control and consumer empowerment, but marketers and consumers more generally. In a post-marketing world marketers and consumers are finally "in this together", pursuing hand-in-hand a future where both want the same thing, namely a ubiquitous marketing presence so ambient, personalizing, automated and relevant that consumers no longer can or want to live without it. In the eyes of digital marketers, it is them who offer genuine progress of capitalism, but with a surprising twist. Capitalism will be transformed for the better with *more* surveillance marketing, not less.

The daemon that has been exorcised in a post-marketing world is, thus, that of "being irrelevant," of "being beside the point, immaterial, unconnected, unrelated, or inapplicable to what your prospects or customers care about" (Albee, 2015: 13). Irrelevance is the vestige of an outdated mode of marketing that had no choice but to push through its many channels an incessant flow of misaddressed messages and offers in order to get the correct message and offer to the correct person at least some of the time (Acxiom, 2015; Albee, 2015). Marketing, in this sense, can be defined as a surplus of communication and persuasion that does not find a proper target. Hence, marketing *is* marketing by the force of its own negativity—by failures to "be on target", failures to be personal, to be meaningful, and so on. The fault for marketing's negativity is not necessarily placed on the marketers themselves, whose good intentions to serve consumers were simply not yet met with the tools necessary to avoid the

persistent production of negative surplus. Digital marketers acknowledge that the crude tools of pre-digital marketing research—"20th century marketing," as Gary Vaynerchuk derisively calls it (Vaynerchuk, 2013, see also Solis, 2010)—could only produce poor simulations of actual consumers that were unsuitable for the production of a world of hyper-relevant, and therefore absent, marketing. That was the time of epistemological uncertainty and of marketers never really knowing the consumer in the deepest sense. In this narrative, the corporate marketing of the 20th century was marketing *precisely because* it could never truly be relevant.

However, while in the first instance digital marketing is an epistemological vision (we now have much better knowledge), in the final instance digital marketing is a vision of ontological intervention. Digital marketers believe that once surveillance and automatic data processing and response become ubiquitous, marketing can be extended "without limit" (Anderson, 2011). As a permanent background presence—always monitoring, assessing, and responding to consumer activities—Zuboff (2015) argues that marketing aims to anticipate behavior before it occurs (see also Zeally et al., 2018). She sees a world where new surveillance and data processing technologies have become so powerful and all-encompassing that they are able to produce a kind of foreknowledge of consumer behavior, similar to the psychic power of the crime-fighting "precogs" in the 2002 movie *Minority Report*. Thus, Zuboff's notion of *anticipatory conformity* is ultimately an epistemological one: whoever has the power of perfect knowledge (Google, Facebook, Amazon, NSA?) can predict behavior and act on those predictions in a (hyper)relevant manner.

As an epistemological concept, anticipatory conformity may correctly capture the current power hierarchy, distinguishing between those who know and those who do not, but it fails to grasp the ontological transformation ushered in by the age of networked, Big Data-driven, automated marketing. Once consumers are embedded in increasingly personalized algorithmic environments and automated feedback loops the question is no longer simply one of knowing what the consumer will do next, but of *shaping* the intention itself through the regulatory cycle of the hypernudge (Yeung, 2017). According to Yeung, individual autonomy and agency are severely limited in this world of hypernudging. Consumer choices are no longer attributable to an entirely self-determined and autonomous cognitive process and consumer intentions become co-created outcomes of a process that now includes the marketers (Yeung, 2017). Hypernudging therefore is no longer predominantly about knowing the consumer subject, but co-creating it at an ontological level (Yeung, 2017). Importantly, from the perspective of digital marketers, the ability to intervene at the level of subjectivity through hypernudging is precisely what produces hyper-relevance. This is the logic of post-marketing at its purest: because hyper-relevance is framed as a shared ethos of marketers and consumers, the manipulation of intentions and the co-construction of consumer subjectivity by a system that "knows better" loses its sinister overtones. The manipulation of consumer decision-making at the pre-cognitive level now comes to be understood as an augmentation of consumer agency, autonomy, and power, rather than their loss.

In this scenario, the vision of digital marketing is to create a reality that integrates seamlessly and completely with the anticipated reality of fully individuated consumers (Featherstone, 2006) in ways that consumers no longer experience as marketing. The aim is to replace what digital marketers consider an outmoded ethos of marketing that relies on interruption, disruption, and on marketing interventions that are generally inefficient and unwanted by all market participants (e.g., Wollan et al., 2017). Instead, for digital marketers the techno-architectural designing of choice and hypernudging of behavior made possible by automated computational analytics should be precisely the point of marketing because they represent seamless, invisible marketing interventions at the level of intention and subjectivity. After all, designed marketing manipulations that deliver exactly what people want or exactly what they believe they want is no longer manipulation. In this reality, the digital marketer is the consumer's confidant, friend, ally), always present but largely in the background and seemingly passive, discreetly offering a relevant world without any marketing waste (Zeally et al., 2018). It is in this sense that digital marketing in its newest stage—fueled by ubiquitous consumer surveillance, automatic computational analysis of all online digital media content, personal online behaviors and communication, and automated responses based on this analysis—aspires to leave marketing behind; or as actor turned successful digital entrepreneur Ashton Kutcher puts it, to do "un-marketing" (Kutchner, in Solis, 2010). The paradoxical endpoint of the logic of digital marketing is thus this: marketing, when always present, always on, always modulating, always nudging and thus reality-making, ceases to be marketing at all.

Conclusion

In the age of surveillance capitalism, digital marketers have reimagined marketing. Surveillance capitalism is grounded in an erosion of privacy, the usurping of consumer autonomy, hypernudging and the radicalization

of consumer manipulation, which, for marketers no longer stand in opposition to consumer autonomy and empowerment. What were once seemingly irreconcilable and opposite in fact require one another to co-exist and to thrive. We suggest the concept of the symbolic act to understand how the notion of (hyper) relevance functions as a suturing device that stitches together a reality (as fantasy) where two opposites can co-exist. Through the figure of relevance, digital marketers envision a politics of cooperation (see also Zwitter, 2014). Relevance functions as a shared ethos among digital marketing professionals, an ethos they believe radically transforms marketing from a crude technique of persuasion and manipulation that operates on masses of consumers "from the outside", as "the other of the consumer" (Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016: 105), to a technique of mutually shared anticipatory conformity (Zuboff, 2015) that works with and directly through the subjectivity of consumer. Worlds are co-created while consumer choices, and in the final analysis, consumer subjects, become manufactured via incessant, iterative interactions with cybernetically intelligent systems. In this conceptualization of consumer empowerment, "good" and autonomous consumer decisions are decisions designed by computational marketing analytic systems, yet experienced as autonomous and self-directed.

Thus, in the world of digital marketers total marketing control makes consumers more autonomous and empowered, not less. In this sense, relevance helps marketers to resolve symbolically a contradiction that cannot otherwise be resolved. For relevance to function as a symbolic act, it is not essential that relevance can be defined or even that it is something concrete and real (cf. Zwick and Bradshaw, 2016). What matters is that the symbolic act constructs a romance perspective for marketers, consumers, investors, and any other possible stakeholders that allows everyone to believe that two things that seem to be at odds with each other can harmoniously be brought together (see Fry, 2012). Thus, marketers embrace a vision of a world where surveillance and computational analytics create perfect manipulation and anticipatory consumer conformity (Zuboff, 2019) *and* consumer autonomy and empowerment *at the same time*. Or, perhaps more accurately, relevance is the moment when marketing manipulation is seen to disappear and all that is left is the empowered consumer.

In the final analysis, relevance functions as more than just an alibi for extending marketing surveillance and analytical technologies without limit. (Hyper)relevance begins to function as the antidote to marketing altogether: to have intimate knowledge of your customers and to be *truly* relevant as a marketer means to no longer do marketing. The equally fascinating and terrifying vision of digital marketing is therefore a world in which marketing is everywhere and therefore no longer exists.

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Notes

1. Throughout the article we use the terms "automated marketing", "marketing automation". and the currently dominant term "digital marketing" interchangeably. All of these terms describe a world where data collection and processing are ubiquitous and always-on for the purposes of generating automated responses.
2. For many digital marketers, "relevance" is something offered to consumers in exchange for their data. Apple's Terms and Conditions statement provides the following quid pro quo: "We use information about your account, browsing, purchases, and downloads in the Stores to offer advertising to ensure that Search Ads in the App Store and ads in Apple News, where available, are relevant to you" (Apple Inc., 2018). Facebook user data gathering is "to show ads that are relevant and useful" and "most interesting" to users (Facebook, 2018).

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