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COMMENTARY



Patriarchal marketing and the symbolic annihilation of women

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ABSTRACT

In this commentary, I introduce the concept of patriarchal marketing in examining the persistence of gender inequality in marketing and consumer culture. I define patriarchal marketing as marketing that operates in accordance with a male-dominated power structure, in turn dominating, oppressing and exploiting women. I name this as a problem that produces the symbolic annihilation of women. In turn, this has three effects: trivialisation of the complexities of women's lives, omission of those outside of the hegemonic feminine ideal and condemnation of women's corporeality. I propose that the adoption of a feminist standpoint can challenge the oppressive power structures of patriarchal marketing that symbolically annihilate women.

KEYWORDS

Gender; marketing; feminist theory; patriarchy; symbolic annihilation

It is not a controversial statement to highlight that marketing has a woman problem.

For decades now, women have been devalued through marketing communications that stereotype, idealise, objectify and glorify violence against women (Grau & Zotos, 2016; Gurrieri et al., 2016; Schroeder & Borgerson, 1998). Marketers have (narrowly) targeted women with specific 'solutions' for their 'needs', creating gendered products (that often attract a higher price) and setting the agenda for what exactly women's 'problems' should constitute. Indeed, by persuading women that their bodies are constantly in need of alteration and improvement – and offering myriad products in the marketplace to remedy this (Bordo, 1993) – marketing both creates and fuels the 'insecure consumption' that contributes to the preservation of a patriarchal society (McDonagh & Prothero, 1997).

In this commentary, to better understand the persistence of gender inequality in marketing and consumer culture (Fischer, 2015), I conceive this as patriarchal marketing. I define patriarchal marketing as marketing that operates in accordance with a male-dominated power structure, in turn dominating, oppressing and exploiting women. As Walby (1990) presents, patriarchy operates in a nuanced and complex manner through structures that subordinate women – acknowledging that intersectional differences mean that these structures may be experienced in different ways. One of these structures is culture, within which gendered meanings are produced and perpetuated from a patriarchal perspective, in turn fostering different norms and values for women and

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men. Patriarchal marketing operates under this structure. I name this as a problem in order for future feminist studies in marketing and consumer research to further interrogate its parameters and effects. This also opens up possibilities for exploring solutions to address the harms fostered by patriarchal marketing

One effect of patriarchal marketing is the symbolic annihilation of women. Symbolic annihilation was first proposed as a concept by Gerbner and Gross (1976) to describe the absence of representation, or underrepresentation, of a group of people in the media, for example, on the basis of sex, race or sexual orientation, which in turn propagates social inequalities. Tuchman (1978) contends that symbolic annihilation has three effects for women, namely trivialisation, omission and condemnation, which in turn affect women's opportunities to participate fully in society. I now turn to how each of these are enacted through patriarchal marketing.

First, patriarchal marketing symbolically annihilates women by *trivialising* the complexities of women's lives. Through patriarchal marketing, women are presented in limited ways that tend to adhere to gender stereotypes. For example, products that relate to work inside the home, such as housework or caring for children, are still predominantly targeted to women and represented as 'women's work' (Furnham & Paltzer, 2010; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos, 2009). Consequently, women continue to be portrayed in stereotypical roles, such as homemaker and mother (Eisend, 2010; Matthes et al., 2016). Gender displays in marketing images, namely conventionalised portrayals of masculinity and femininity, lead women to be portrayed as vulnerable, fragile, powerless and submissive whilst men are portrayed as confident, comfortable, authoritative and aware of their surroundings (Goffman, 1979). This distinction communicates that what is constructed as feminine is subordinate to what is understood as masculine. Yet, patriarchal marketing continues to peddle the 'feminine mystique' (Friedan, 1963), whereby a woman's purpose is defined through the fulfilment of femininity. In its contemporary form, this 'postfeminist mystique' offers up femininity as an 'empowered choice' – for example, domesticity as the employment of managerial and leadership skills to control and create order in the home (Munford & Waters, 2014).

In addition to being a mother and homemaker, patriarchal marketing portrays women as sex objects and fosters expectations based on idealised feminine beauty. Such ideals are mercurial and forever shifting, meaning that beauty work for women is never complete (Wolf, 1992) and comes to occupy a significant role in women's lives, to be resolved through consumption (Bartky, 1990; Goldman, 1992; McRobbie, 2004). This focus on physical appearance fuels both scrutiny upon women's bodies and the alienation of women from their own bodies (Dworkin, 1974) and sustains gendered relations of power (Connell, 1987; McRobbie, 2015). Such representations have a demeaning and dehumanising impact on girls and women (Jhally et al., 2010), for 'when portrayed as objects, women are represented as available for use, exploitation and mistreatment' (Gallagher, 2001, p. 94). This is most strikingly the case when female bodies are represented in marketing as dismembered parts that are fetishised (Cortese, 2016). Yet, even when portrayed as active, desiring subjects, women continue to be disciplined and subordinated (Gill, 2007). Beginning from a pinkified childhood where domesticity and appearance are centred (Auster & Mansbach, 2012), women are trivialised and robbed of their full self-hood by patriarchal marketing. Yet, this ever-present marketised portrayal of

women as the homemaker, mother or sex object is recognised as both harmful and out of step with contemporary society (Gurrieri et al., 2019).

Second, patriarchal marketing has symbolically annihilated women through *omission* of those outside of the hegemonic feminine ideal. By offering a narrow construction of what it means to be a woman – namely light-skinned, able-bodied, youthful, slim and heterosexual – certain identities are excluded and rendered invisible in the marketplace (Saren et al., 2019), reflecting both categorical and intersectional forms of marginalisation (Gopaldas & Siebert, 2018). For example, women of colour have been both underrepresented and misrepresented by marketers (Cortese, 2016). We are now witnessing the increasing use of mixed-race representations, such as the ‘Pan-Asian’ ideal (Yip et al., 2019), used by marketers as cultural currency to appeal to and appear inclusive of women of colour (Harrison et al., 2017). However, this ‘illusion of inclusion’ still maintains a commitment to white bodies as beautiful (Hunter, 2011). This is reflected in the global lucrative markets for skin lightening products and cosmetic surgeries to Anglicise facial features and body shapes, that promulgate a ‘yearning for whiteness’, despite being fraught with risks (Glenn, 2008; Hunter, 2011).

Similarly, women over 40 remain invisible in the marketplace. In the production of ‘normative femininity’ (Bartky, 2003), younger women are celebrated for their beauty, whilst older women disappear. Although older adults are generally under-represented in advertising, the under-representation of older women is more extensive than that of older men (Baumann & De Laat, 2012; Simcock & Sudbury, 2006). This invisibility is reflected in the cultural imperative of ‘successful ageing’ or ‘ageing gracefully’ for women, whereby maintaining a youthful appearance is paramount (Bordo, 1993; Calasanti & Slevin, 2006). Consequently, omitted in the marketplace are representations of visible signs of ageing for women, such as grey hair or wrinkles. Instead, anti-ageing industries perpetuate the myth that ageing can be controlled and uphold limited parameters of acceptable femininity and ageing – often whilst insincerely targeting women with ‘empowering’ messages of authenticity (Laware & Moutsatsos, 2013). Patriarchal marketing has rendered fat women, lesbians and women with disabilities utterly invisible in the marketplace, including being marginalised in terms of access and choice (Scaraboto & Fischer, 2013). Women in their diversity cannot recognise themselves in patriarchal marketing – even when it purports to represent ‘real women’. The most obvious answer as to why this is the case is to examine the industry gatekeepers, who are typically male, white, middle-aged, upper middle to upper class and heterosexual, and the hyper masculine cultures in which they work (Boulton, 2013; Gregory, 2009; Grow & Deng, 2014). The omission of women outside of the hegemonic feminine ideal has important implications for what is culturally seen as the norm, perpetuating enduring disadvantages for those rendered invisible.

Third, patriarchal marketing symbolically annihilates women through *condemnation* of women’s corporeality. As noted above, through trivialisation bodies are centred and focused as being of primary importance for women under patriarchal marketing. However, narrow ideals are offered as to what constitutes an ‘acceptable’ body. Simultaneously, marketers present the human body as malleable and always in need of improvement (Bordo, 1993). This communicates to women the importance of constantly working on, altering and improving their body to achieve unattainable and mercurial ideals that reinforce the value of physical attractiveness for women. Myriad and ever evolving ‘solutions’ are offered in the marketplace to achieve this end, such as cosmetics

(Gurrieri & Drenten, 2019), shapewear (Zanette & Scaraboto, 2019) and fashion (Parmentier, 2016), that have come to represent consumption that is both iconic and particular to women. Patriarchal marketing drives the pursuit of the hegemonic feminine ideal by fostering anxieties about the body that are to be resolved through consumption, such as dieting products or cosmetic surgery (Bartky, 1990). In the digital age, this imperative towards alteration is reflected in the litany of photo-editing applications that provide a 'virtual makeover' of the body, to airbrush 'flaws' and 'imperfections' in selfies posted on social media.

By communicating that the natural state of the female body is unacceptable, patriarchal marketing reinforces the cultural shaming of women's bodies and bodily functions. Natural physiology, such as body hair, is pathologized as abnormal (Wood, 2010), to be removed either temporarily in the form of razors, waxing or depilatories, or permanently through laser hair removal treatments. The advertisement for the first women's razor marketed by Gillette in 1915 highlighted that it 'solves an embarrassing personal problem' (i.e. female armpit hair) (Komar, 2016). This same format of convincing women that something normal about their bodies is actually abnormal extrapolates in numerous forms, from eyelash extensions to cellulite treatments to labiaplasty, corresponding with expectations of idealised gendered bodies. Similarly, bodily functions, such as menstruation, are portrayed as a hygienic crisis associated with secrecy and shame to be managed through consumption (Erchull, 2013; Malefyt & McCabe, 2016). Menstrual blood is sanitised in patriarchal marketing through the unnatural and more clinical choice of blue liquid and euphemistic language is employed that both erases and stigmatises menstruation. In a similar fashion, douching products pathologise the female body by implying that the vagina is in need of disinfection. In fact, douches are not only an unnecessary 'feminine hygiene' product for cleanliness (the vagina is self-cleaning) but scientific evidence highlights that they are associated with a variety of adverse health outcomes (Ferranti, 2010). Through condemnation, patriarchal marketing problematises and shames women's bodies, offering up a variety of marketplace 'solutions' that are unnecessary at best and risky or dangerous at worst.

So how can the oppressive power structures of patriarchal marketing that symbolically annihilate women be challenged? Here, the adoption of a feminist standpoint offers great promise. Feminist standpoint theory argues that knowledge stems from social position and aims to produce alternative knowledge that prioritises thinking from marginalised lives, such as those of women, as a means of destabilising power relations that contribute to subordination and oppression (Harding, 2004). Such an approach does not imply that all women share a single position or standpoint, indeed it can take account of women's different experiences at the intersections of various oppressive social structures (Collins, 1990). Yet, although women's experiences may differ due to their social positions, all still experience sexism under patriarchy.

Recent marketing practice from the standpoint of women's lives has begun to challenge the dominance of patriarchal marketing in the marketplace. Many such efforts have been driven by women entrepreneurs and creative teams that are dominated by women, recognising the need to drive change from within (McDonagh & Prothero, 1997). For example, the #bloodnormal campaign portrayed the everyday lives of menstruating women, including depicting menstrual blood, to challenge the cultural stigmas around menstruation that 'blue blood' patriarchal marketing efforts uphold (Roderick, 2017).

Similarly, aiming to address the ‘pink tax’ that women pay in the razor market, the brand Billie (<https://mybillie.com>) markets a subscription-based discount razor service for women that is promoted through marketing communications that depict women with body hair. Of course, the risk of corporations co-opting this standpoint as a form of ‘commodity feminism’ (Goldman et al., 1991) remains. It will be the work of future feminist scholars in marketing and consumer research to unpack these tensions.

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