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## Marketing strategy and the hunt for era V

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# Marketing Strategy and the Hunt for Era V

## Abstract

This paper sets out a vision and bold research agenda for the future of marketing strategy. It is a response to a recent special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* in which Shelby Hunt (2018) celebrates the achievements of forty years of marketing strategy. In noting the passing of the ‘old guard’, Hunt calls on a new generation of scholars to meet the challenges confronting marketing and to develop new theories and frameworks to advance Marketing Strategy into Era V.

We take for our inspiration Hunt’s own words, specifically his reference to the ‘promising’ and ‘problematic’ that he uses to characterise the current and latent state of marketing strategy. To build our vision and map out our agenda we assemble a motley crew of scholars more accustomed to the shadows of mainstream marketing theory and employ their critical reflexive oeuvre to offer an alternative reading of this discipline through the idea of Marketing Strategy as Discourse (MSAD). Within the paper we outline the role that discourse can perform as a resource to reconfigure our appreciation of marketing strategy.

## Summary Statement of Contribution

In considering how marketing strategy and strategists are constituted and produced through discourse we offer a critique of marketing strategy in Era IV, and through identifying themes and gaps in the current literature, propose a future research agenda for marketing strategy that offers promise and inspiration for a new generation of scholars.

**Keywords:** Critical marketing studies, discourse, marketing strategy

## Introduction

Our inspiration for writing this paper comes from a recent special issue of the *Journal of Marketing Management* in which Shelby Hunt (2018) called for greater attention to be paid to the sub discipline of marketing strategy. Hunt provides a detailed and methodical review of the history of marketing strategy, utilising the chronological device of the ‘Four Eras of Marketing Thought’ devised by Wilkie and Moore in 2003. For Hunt (2018) the year 2020 marks the 40th anniversary of the inception of Era IV, an era associated with the advancement of marketing orientation strategy; relationship marketing strategy; brand equity strategy; strategic marketing; and R-A theory of competition. Hunt proposes that now is the time to begin looking ahead to Era V: “the ‘old guard’ that advanced the marketing discipline in Era IV will have given way to a new generation of marketing scholars. This new generation will be responsible for advancing the marketing discipline and, within it, the area of strategic marketing. Era V’s marketing scholars will inherit a discipline that is both promising and problematic” (Hunt 2018, pp. 38-9).

Our purpose through this paper is to map out a proposed agenda for research into marketing strategy for Era V that celebrates the ‘promising and the problematic’. However, ours is not an attempt to create a new framework or model of marketing strategy, nor to produce a new orthodoxy of practical application. Rather, moving into Era V, we, like Pitt and Treen (2019), believe marketing strategy needs to adopt a more critical reflexive lens on its own praxis. Our aim, then, is to apply the critical turn in the wider marketing discipline to the study of

marketing strategy. In doing so, we seek to put marketing strategy back on the research agenda by proposing an alternative reading of this discipline, not with the aim of producing new models, theories or frameworks for marketing managers, but by considering how marketing strategy and strategists are constituted and produced through discourse. In doing so, we acknowledge and review a significant body of critical literature that already exists which addresses many of the concerns that we raise in this paper. Our contribution rests in providing a structure and coherence to this critical scholarship whilst also identifying gaps, opportunities and possibilities that can form the basis of a new and organised research agenda for critical scholarship into marketing strategy in Era V.

We locate our contribution in what we would broadly define as critical marketing studies (CMS hereafter). Critical reflections concerning the issue of resource allocation, operations of markets and the consequences of these on people and the environment has been evident in religious, academic and popular writing throughout history (Block et al, 1985; Veblen, 1994; Klein, 2000). CMS, however, is a response to, and, attempt to transform, what has become known as the Marketing Management School (Shaw and Jones 2005); a particular conceptualisation and representation of marketing which emerged from the 1930s, achieving dominance post 1950 (what we will refer to as the ‘dominant discourse of marketing strategy’ throughout the paper). The demands for strong management to support the Cold War effort (McLaren, 2019, Tadajewski, 2006), a drive for more scientific approaches to management research (Pierson 1959) and the quest for scholarly rigour in the business curriculum (Gordon and Howell, 1959) supported the rise of this more scientific approach to marketing. This saw consideration of social welfare and distributive justice reframed within a celebration of individualism, consumerism, capital accumulation (Jones and Monieson 1990) and saw an extension of the market into areas previously considered within the social realm (Smith and Robbins, 1991). Central to this approach is a view that marketing and the marketing manager hold the power to transform society, an approach “which can be used to make the world a more equitable place, embracing cultural diversity, breaking down barriers and helping those who do not have a voice” (Dean et al., 2018: 1441).

Tadajewski et al. (2018: 15) refer to critical literature, of which CMS is a part, as a “shadow” that has accompanied managerial marketing, seeking to hold the assumptions and performativity claims of the sort exemplified by Dean et al. (2018) to account. Understood in its basic form, CMS is a drive to question the idealised, the taken-for-granted, to highlight power imbalances and give ‘face’ to the marginal and non-represented (Tadajewski, 2014). One might expect that critical marketing studies scholars would have found within strategy a rich seam of material to mine, and yet, strangely, that has not proved to be the case (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). To date, much of the CMS focus has been in the fields of consumer research (Cova and Cova, 2012; Cronin et al., 2015; Dulsrud and Jacobsen, 2009; Skålén and Fougère, 2007), marketing history (Tadajewski, 2011), supply chain management (Ellis and Higgins, 2006) and marketing management (Svensson, 2007). There has been relatively little critical work on marketing strategy per se. Rather, such links often have to be inferred through work such as Svensson (2007) on marketing work, Skålén (2009) on marketing discourse, and Skålén and Hackley (2011) on marketing practice.

One possible explanation for this, put forward by Hunt (2018), is the relative lack of interest in marketing strategy amongst marketing scholars and students with very few identifying themselves as marketing strategy researchers. For Reibstein, Day, and Wind (2009) the growing interest in consumer research has come at the expense of research on marketing

strategy. This leads Hunt to conclude that “‘strategy’ may be becoming a ‘taboo’ topic or ‘dirty word’. Strategic marketing is, indeed, troubled” (Hunt, 2018, p. 17).

In this paper, we adopt a Foucauldian approach in order to present a *marketing strategy as discourse* perspective. Following Knights and Morgan’s seminal work on corporate strategy, we share their definition of discourse as “a set of ideas and practices which condition our ways of relating to, and acting upon, particular phenomena” (Knights and Morgan, 1991, p. 253). A key word here is ‘condition’, discourse is not an autonomous force, it does not directly ‘do things’ to people and objects, it is a resource that is used by individuals to produce localised presentations and representations of the self and the world.

In order to understand the power effects of discourse we need to consider its constituent elements. In unpacking the elements of discourse, Mantere and Vaars (2008) observe that discourses construct the *concepts*, *objects* and *subject positions* that exist within it. They do not pre-exist somewhere out there in the world but are a product of the discourse. Concepts are the language through which the discourse is communicated. Through the use of particular grammar and syntax the language game of the discourse constitutes the knowledge regime, or truth claims, on which the discourse is rendered visible and also resisted. Objects, or technologies, are deployed to legitimise and normalise certain ways of thinking and doing. They produce power effects through their regulation of the subject positions in relation to the concepts of the discourse. Finally, discourses produce subject positions occupied by social actors within the discourse.

In this paper, we explore these constituent elements of the discourse of marketing strategy and identify the critical scholarship that has already been undertaken in these areas whilst marking out routes for future sustained exploration of key themes and concerns that could become the basis of a critical research agenda for Era V. In doing so, we not only subject the marketing strategy discourse to critical analysis but also, following Mumby’s (2016, p. 886) call for a “re-approachment between critical marketing and critical organization scholarship.” Our aim is to ignite interest in marketing strategy for critical marketing studies. In drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, we join a number of other critical marketing scholars who, thanks to the recent translation and publication of Foucault’s lectures at the College De France (Munro, 2012; Foucault, 2015), have found new opportunities to explore the world of marketing and consumption through a Foucauldian lens (see, for example, Kasabov, 2004; Skálén et al., 2006; Varman et al., 2012; Tadajewski and Jones, 2016).

We now move to consider possible areas of academic exploration for the ‘promising and problematical’ Era V that Hunt (2018) proposes. To provide clarity and conciseness to our argument, we present this exploration by talking about a number of themes, or elements of discourse, namely knowledge, subjectivity, talk, performance and technology. However, it is important to note from the outset that we do not see these as self-contained or isolated areas. Rather, they constitute the elements that make up the discursive formation of marketing strategy. They are intended to be read collectively as a complex circulatory flow of practices, knowledge and technologies. We begin by exploring marketing strategy as a power/knowledge regime.

### **Marketing Strategy as Power/Knowledge Regime**

For Foucault (1980), discourse is inextricably linked to issues of power, knowledge and truth. Power is productive in the generation of knowledge whilst at the same time being

disseminated through knowledge. The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. From a Foucauldian perspective then, we are interested in the processes through which certain knowledge claims about marketing strategy are rendered visible, knowable, and how dominant discourses come to circulate, and what maintains their position of dominance. As Denegri-Knott and Tadjewski (2017) put it: "...we should look at what is said, by whom, for what purpose and unravel why it secures discursive and analytic purchase" (p. 225).

Within marketing strategy, the dominant discourse can be described as a process-driven planning cycle, underpinned by an instrumental logic of techno-rationality. It encompasses the practices of both planning and positioning and typically separates out formulation from implementation employing a hierarchical top-down decision-making process. Frequently derived from quantifiable goals and objectives, in combination with a more vaguely defined mission or vision, it is typically task-oriented with measurable outcomes. In this regard, marketing strategy shares with the wider discourses of marketing management and strategic management a largely positivistic and prescriptive logic.

Of course, there are always alternative discourses that compete for dominance in any particular field. In the case of marketing, we might cite relationship approaches (Gummesson, 1997; Grönroos, 2006;), service dominant approaches (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), and value co-creation approaches (Prahalad and Ramaswamy 2004) as potential discourses that in some regards extend or move beyond the techno-rational model of the Marketing Management School that we have described above. However, following Miles and Nilsson (2018), we would argue that, as discursive constructs, these approaches share many of the underlying characteristics described above. Space limitations prevent us from exploring these alternative discourses in detail in this paper, yet we suspect they could also usefully be subjected to the kind of rigorous critical unpacking that we seek to undertake in relation to the dominant discourse. In this regard, Gross and Laamanen (2018), citing one of the more recently fashionable ideas in marketing strategy, the 'co-creation of value' discourse, argue that the way this knowledge is presented and delivered through marketing texts hides alternative truth claims and the power effects of such practices such as the frequent co-destruction of value, consumer exploitation and the manipulation of those at the bottom of the so-called pyramid (Prahalad, 2004).

We argue that these bodies of knowledge that constitutes the discipline of marketing strategy are not objective nor real but are embodied in the social practice and performances that perpetuate the discourse through certain discursive practices. In this regard marketing strategy knowledge has power effects. It regulates and normalizes certain statements, technologies and practices that make up the discourse of marketing strategy and inform how it comes to be taught and practiced. The privileging of certain ideas, concepts, viewpoints and positions are given primacy in the discourse whilst others are silenced, excluded or relegated.

This particular representation of marketing strategy, this body of knowledge, circulates through its teaching in business schools, its dissemination through consultancy interventions and training workshops, and is perpetuated by marketing strategists and managers in their everyday lives. As Hackley (2003) rightly observes, the "hectoring prose of mainstream marketing management texts has become a thoroughly taken-for-granted mode of discourse in the business school curriculum" (p. 1327). Marketing texts, Hackley goes on to argue are "devoid of discordance and awash with manufactured consensus" (*ibid.*). However, as social artefacts, these texts are not without power effects. The claims to scientific facts, proven

hypotheses and ‘real world’ application imbue marketing strategy discourse with a degree of authority and legitimacy that is both seductive and hard to challenge.

However, critical scholars of marketing have taken up the challenge. Not only have they challenged the validity and use value of the knowledge that this dominant discourse perpetuates but also the extent to which the knowledge regime that makes up marketing strategy is actually practiced in ‘the real world’ (see, for example, Hackley, 2003; Kumar, 2018; Svensson, 2007; Zwick & Cayla, 2011).

A sustained and organized critical engagement with the dominant discourse of marketing strategy will be a necessary feature of Era V, in which those early to mid-twentieth century ideas of marketing, created primarily for a production-based stable economic system, need to be rethought, challenged and questioned in a 21<sup>st</sup> century environment of surveillance, digitalization, consumer excess, climate change, the depletion of natural resources and a rapidly growing population. For Fuat Firat (2018) resistance also means looking carefully at the policy-makers and institutions of power that shape and govern marketing practices. Whose constituent members are more closely aligned with the elite and the powerful and those that would see the perpetuation of the dominant logic of marketing but who seldom have the interests of, to use Fuat Firat’s words “the most underprivileged, disempowered and vulnerable members of society” (2018: 1020). Marketing knowledge in Era V needs to redress the imbalance of capitalist accumulation and market economics with the needs of wider society and the natural environment.

In this regard, a Marketing Strategy as Discourse (MSAD) perspective is well placed to produce the counterclaims and alternative truths which can provide a stumbling block or hinderance to the truth claims of the dominant discourse, unearthing its points of instability (Dick and Collings, 2014). It can challenge the dominant discourse for that which is not said, for points of repression, of silence, to make visible that which is not seen. Here we suggest a future agenda for marketing strategy as discourse in Era V needs to continue the work of critical scholars in systematically unmasking the power effects of the dominant discourse of marketing strategy. . It needs to give voice to those who are isolated, excluded or exploited through the practices of marketing. Moreover it is required to subject the frameworks, models and theories of marketing strategy to sustained critique to expose their limitations, excesses and false promises; and to recognise the destructive power effects of many of these seemingly innocuous, banal and supposedly neutral knowledge claims. To do so also necessitates closer examination of the key actors at the centre of this discourse. To this issue we now turn.

### **Marketing Strategy as Subject Positioning**

There is no marketer outside of the discourse of marketing. The subject position is constructed in and through the talk of marketing (as we shall see later in the paper). Submitting ourselves to the discourse has the perverse effect of rendering us visible within it. Our desire to ‘fit in,’ to be seen as worthy and legitimate in the eyes of colleagues, customers and managers constitutes an important reason for the perpetuation of the discourse. To date, the mainstream literature has had very little to say about the role or identity of the marketer. Instead, the preference seems to be for a focus on the detached employment of the technologies of marketing strategy – its tools rather than its practices or practitioners. These latter concerns have largely been the concern of critical scholars.

The view of the marketer in the neoliberal economic theory that underpins the dominant discourse is one of a rational agent consisting of a core self-determining identity. In this regard, the strategist can be seen as a contemporary manifestation of Adam Smith's rational economic man (sic), first presented to us in his *The Wealth of Nations* (1776/1976): underpinned by the pursuit of utility maximisation through the practice of prudence.

Against this representation, critical scholarship draws attention to the subjectification of the individual into a subject position in relation to the discourse (Skålén, 2009). The way the marketer utilizes the language of marketing, and deploys the technologies, symbols and artefacts of marketing strategy in order to construct marketing plans and programmes becomes a significant area of inquiry. From this perspective, the marketer becomes a central node in the matrix of marketing strategy discourse rather than a detached observer. Their credentialed status as experts normalises practices which in turn have power effects in the dissemination of legitimized marketing performances (Brownlie and Saren, 1997).

Critical scholarship also draws attention to the way that these subjectivities exist in complex webs of power relations that regulate their interaction and their ability to influence the strategy process. As argued by Ezzamel and Willmott (2010), it is through power relations that the individual becomes visible in the discourse; they are subjected to a position in relation to the power/knowledge regime that connects them to other subject positions. We continue to perpetuate the myth of rational, technocratic planning not because it has proven itself to be the most effective way of doing marketing strategy but because it is what we are told we should be doing. It provides a shield, a cover of protection to insulate the fragile and precarious identity of the marketer and when planning fails, it cannot be the fault of the system. Blame or fault must lie elsewhere, in poor execution or a failure by some defined 'other'.

This is one of the power effects of the knowledge regime of marketing strategy. It produces a regime of truth that is hard to challenge in part because it provides a veil of protection. As Laine et al. (2016) argue, data, calculation and 'facts' are used by strategists to "submit to technical-rational knowledge" (p. 514), which both legitimizes their position and the decisions they make. They go on to argue "By bringing out his [sic] extraordinary capability to see what others do not see, the manager demonstrates mastery of strategic leadership and evokes the identity of a heroic strategic leader" (*ibid.*).

Dameron and Torest (2014) make the point that although discourse exercises power through individuals, this is a productive form of power that can also provide agency for individuals and be mobilised in pursuit of their own purposes, in order to protect, legitimize or progress their own agendas, status, position or career. Thus, the marketing manager who plays the game of strategy can position their self as an important actor in the organisation or as an attractive hire to external parties. They can demonstrate their expert status through reference to strategic accomplishments to parties, both internal and external, who also subscribe to the power of the discourse of marketing strategy. Speaking the language of strategy in itself can be a powerful resource to deploy in the personal strategies of strategists. The ability to do so and the rewards of being considered a credentialed expert then become a motivation for others to seek such recognition, in large part through perpetuating the discourse. In an inherently unknowable and unmanageable environment, adherence to a technocratic, rational strategy process, provides a degree of security and certainty to organisational activity. It allows things to get done. For decisions to be made. For identities to be secured.



Despite the centrality of the marketing strategist at the heart of the discourse of marketing strategy, echoing Clegg et al. (2010), we know very little about who these people are, where they come from and how they developed and rose to their positions. We know little about the personal strategies of marketing strategists, their careers paths, education background and training. In Era V, building on the work of marketing scholars who have begun the critical work of interrogating the subject positioning of the marketer (See Lein, 1997; Gross and Laamanen 2018; Hackley, 2011, and other papers in that special issue), further research needs to be undertaken to explore the identity work of marketing strategists: what are the processes through which one becomes a marketing strategist? How is that identity conferred on the individual? What training do they undertake? What credentials do they possess? How do they perform the role, utilizing what language games, technologies and objects? These seem like fruitful and necessary avenues for future research.

Attempts at beginning to answer such questions have already been undertaken by scholars in the 'marketing as practice' field. Gross and Laamanen (2018), for example, explore the identity work of marketing practitioners through practice-based approaches, arguing that 'professional knowing' is a form of practical engagement in marketing work which challenges the "ideological wallpaper of textbook marketing" (p. 1173).

An alternative way of beginning to engage with these questions might be, following Bourdieu (1979/2010), to consider the social and cultural capital necessary to become a marketing strategist. The ability to deploy artefacts, symbols and technologies in an effective and convincing way requires an ability to speak the language of marketing strategy and to perform the role convincingly. Cultural capital accumulated through education, employment and experience can facilitate the effectiveness of this role. At the same time, social capital, accumulated through networks of professional associations, colleagues and other institutions strengthens the position of some strategists over others. As well as considering the accumulation of capital amongst marketing strategists, we might look more closely at how this identity is embodied (more of which can be found in the next section).

Other subject positions worthy of further research in Era V include the academics, and academic consultants who produce, disseminate, and regurgitate much of the knowledge on marketing strategy. Historically, many of the most influential marketing texts, models and frameworks emerged from practitioners in industry. But what role do today's lecturers and professors of marketing play, many of them career academics who may have limited experience of marketing practice. On what basis do they (we) assert their (our) position of expertise on marketing strategy? How do we teach and write about the subject? In what ways do we perpetuate the discourse through the continual reproduction of dated concepts and frameworks?

Similarly, we might also consider the student of marketing. What makes an individual choose this degree path? What do they hope to achieve in the process and what outcome are they aiming to secure? From where does their image of the marketer emerge and what influence does popular culture and the world of marketing and advertising around us have on their understanding? After all, popular culture is rich with representations of marketers in shows such as *Mad Men* (2007-2015), *WIA* (2014) and *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin* (1976-1979), and films such as *The Joneses* (2009), *Syrup* (2013) and *Wag the Dog* (1997). In short, what is the seduction of marketing that makes so many sign-up for these programmes? We might also usefully consider the subject positions of consultants and gurus. As noted by Clark (2004), this particular group is both consumer and producer of marketing knowledge and

plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of marketing knowledge to a wider practice audience, whether through consulting projects or through the production of the kinds of text aimed for marketing managers, such as those frequently found in airport lounge and train station book stores. More recently, the emergence of online commentators has become an increasingly important and influential group in the shaping of the knowledge of marketing strategy. We might also add here what Clark (2004) calls 'hero managers' such as Jack Welch, Richard Branson, Phil Knight and Steve Jobs on whom many biographies, case studies and features have been written.

The detailed and careful study of the subject positions of marketing strategy is a significantly undertheorized area of inquiry and one ripe for further consideration. By exploring each of these groups, perhaps through ethnographic study and biographical research, we might better understand how marketing knowledge is produced, reproduced and disseminated and the power effects of subscribing to the discourse, or of actively resisting it.

### **Marketing Strategy as Gendered and Embodied Discourse**

Knights and Morgan (1991) were among the first to draw our attention to the gendered connotations of the discourse of strategy. With its origins in the military, then disseminated through the deployment of former military officers to senior positions in large enterprises, the masculine military connotations of strategy are widely recorded and visible to see (Krause, 1996; Ho and Choi, 1997; Bose, 2004; Kolar and Toporišič, 2007). The dominant discourse of marketing strategy has adopted much of this imagery. Thus, we see in the writings of marketing strategy a preference for an assertive, masculine voice with militaristic undertones: the market as battlefield; competitors as the enemy; captains of industry; marketing campaigns, stealth marketing, guerrilla tactics, audience as targets and so on (see Hunt and Menon, 1995 for a critical examination of this language).

Largely absent from the dominant discourse of marketing strategy are women (as a social category) and the feminine (as a gendering category). Indeed, as Tadjewski and Maclaran (2013) have observed: "The role of women in marketing has been, if not completely ignored, then at least given too little attention" (p. 260). As atonement the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* published a series of biographical profiles of prominent female contributors to the development of the field of marketing. We are thus belatedly introduced to the roles played by Pauline Arnold (Jones, 2013), Caroline Robinson Jones (Davis, 2013), Lillian Moller Gilbreth (Graham, 2013) and Martha Van Rensselaer (Zuckerman, 2013) in their respective fields of market research, advertising, scientific marketing and consumer research.

Writing these figures back into the history of marketing thought and practice is of course welcomed, but as Hearn and Hein (2015) note, the issue extends beyond negligent omission. Marketing has traditionally positioned the marketer as male and the consumer as female, with the attendant gendering of marketing work as masculine and consumption as feminine realms. This distinction is evident in the literature where discussions surrounding gender, identity and sexuality are predominantly found within studies of consumer research (Borgerson et al 2005; Branchik, 2002; Eichler 2012). Furthermore, the predominance of men in marketing roles and the wider masculine discourse of marketing have contributed to the maintaining of a lower status for women in marketing roles and the use of the feminine as a foil against which to situate the masculine norm (Alvesson, 1998).

For example, in their study of female marketing managers, Maclaran *et al.* (1997) observe a self-awareness amongst this group at their perceived marginalization as they challenge the norm of the marketer/male consumer/female binary opposition: their subjectivity often undermined by being “pigeon-holed as the smiling faces of marketing, decorative if necessary additions to the marketing “team’s” portfolio” (Maclaran *et al.*, 1997, pp. 315-6). They go on to discuss the difficulties that female marketing managers have in gaining access to and securing roles that are more highly prized within the organization, such as strategic decision-making and strategic planning roles. Moreover, the relative lack of numbers of women in the profession, at least in its upper echelons, further restrict their career possibilities. As the authors conclude: “They believed themselves to be defined as women first and as marketing managers second” (Maclaran *et al.*, 1997, pp. 315-6).

In Era V, research needs to attend to the female and the feminine in marketing strategy. Building on the pioneering work of Maclaran *et al.* (1997) and other authors cited above, a future research agenda in this area needs to look carefully at the way in which women in marketing work, and the feminine in the discourse of marketing strategy, are positioned both in the everyday work of marketing managers but also in the embedded gendered connotations of much of the marketing strategy literature.

Whilst the identity of marketing strategist is clearly positioned as masculine, this seemingly does not manifest itself in the body of the strategist, for as Minocha and Stonehouse (2007), note, the strategy literature tends to be largely disembodied. Whilst much critical work and attention has been drawn to the consumer body and the display of the body in marketing materials such as advertising images (see, for example, Penalzoa, 1994; Sweetman, 1999; Patterson and Elliott, 2002; Borgeson and Schroeder, 2005; McFerran *et al.*, 2010; Grau and Yorgos Zotos, 2016), the body of the strategist behind such campaigns seems to be something of an absent presence. However, as Minocha and Stonehouse go on to observe, the body acts both positively and negatively on the strategy process: “the practice of strategy is embedded both in its ‘talk’ and also in non-verbal, physical actions” (Minocha and Stonehouse, 2007, p. 438). In a similar vein, Venter *et al.* (2015) recently observed that “practitioners draw on their whole bodies when implementing a marketing process like market segmentation. Marketers are not just mouths that speak and brains that think, but people that move about, point, gesture, occupy and produce space and generally communicate non-verbally as well as verbally” (Venter *et al.* 2015, p.78). Elsewhere, Rasche and Chia (2009) call for greater attention to the bodily practices and ‘performances of the body’ through which the discourse of strategy is enacted. By ‘performances of the body’, they mean ‘bodily doings’ (including movement and gestures) and ‘bodily sayings’ (such as speech acts and non-verbal communication). Finally, Smith *et al.* (2015) have argued persuasively that marketing work involves not just language, verbal or written, but that it is also a lived form of knowledge which is tacit, often non-rational and even irrational. However, they argue, too often the lived experience of strategy work is rationalised post-hoc so that it adheres to the demands of the domain discourse of instrumental rationality.

We therefore call on critical scholars on marketing strategy in Era V to attend more closely to the embodied experience of marketing strategy: those bodily movements and non-verbal forms of communication that make up what Smith *et al.* refer to as the praxis and phronesis of marketing strategy, by which they mean: “practical intuitive, emotional, corporeal engagement with experience” (2015: 1032). By researching the experience of marketing managers *in praxis*, scholars will better understand the chaos, complexity and pragmatic nature of marketing strategy. In doing so, the supposedly scientific, rational, and organised

manner in which marketing work is presented in the dominant discourse can be further challenged and more practice-based theories of marketing developed.

### **Marketing Strategy as Language Game**

The language of marketing strategy is a product of, and means of reproducing, the power/knowledge regime of the discourse. Certain speech acts are legitimized whilst other subordinated or excluded. Discourse provides a language that allows some to take part in the conversation – those that can speak the language – and excludes those that cannot. The language ‘game’ is thus one that needs to be learned and played: “...language does not merely reflect social reality but is the very means of constructing and reproducing the world as it is experienced“ (Mantere and Vaara 2008, p. 343).

In this regard, the language of marketing strategy both creates and subsequently provides solutions for the problems of marketing work. Whether that problem be the need for new market growth, increased competition, or a response to changes in consumer tastes, the language of strategy gives structure and meaning to these issues – it constructs them through a specific grammar and syntax. It then draws upon the knowledge of marketing strategy to solve them. Talk is also important in securing one’s subject position in relation to the discourse: “In conversations, participants adopt and/or resist the assigned specific positions depending on the context and topic discussed” (Vaara et al 2010, p. 42). A further element of talk is how it problematizes the subjectivity of those who utilize or are enveloped within the strategy discourse.

In Era V, greater attention needs to be paid to the talk of marketing strategy to consider how such language games work, how they are employed and by whom, and with what (power) effects. In developing such a research agenda, we can draw from a more developed literature on language and talk in critical studies of strategic management. For example, Eriksson and Lehtimäki (2001) have made the important point that “When a certain type of language is widely accepted and used among actors, it is considered legitimate. Legitimate language is closely linked to power in the sense that it is able to reproduce power relationships by providing a commonsense understanding of reality” (Eriksson and Lehtimäki 2001, p. 203). Eriksson and Lehtimäki go on to unpack key elements of the language of strategy that constitute part of the dominant discourse: strategy as normative, hierarchical, technical and rational - that is, a techno-rational, normative discourse informed from the top down. This is coded in the language of planning, of a science of strategy, of a problem-based approach to strategy issues and through the use of tools and technologies to solve these problems.

We see a similar language employed within the discourse of marketing strategy, which is replete with talk of measures and metrics. From market share, cost per lead, conversion rates, margin, sales growth, footfall, penetration in segments etc., marketers, in an attempt to align the practice more closely with the financial imperative, have focused on the evidential and measurable. One power effect of this is political indifference (Gicquel, 2017), derealization (Varman and Al-Almoudi, 2016) or a numericalising of the *other*, with potential to distance the enactment from the consequence (McCabe, 2016). Elsewhere Dunne (2018) points to the political-economic implications that arise from language by urging us to appreciate the world of ‘marketing’, a “rhetorical craft” (p.1298) where marketer and consumer have grown so accustomed to each others’ discourses and tactics that all that remains is a flirtatious interchange where persuasion is accomplished through a double truth dialectic. In the process, principles such as intimacy and sincerity seamlessly encompass conceit and irony.

It is not just through the formal language of models and frameworks that we can gain an understanding of the language of marketing strategy but also in everyday talk of marketing work. As Vaara et al. (2010) have observed, it is in the everyday practice of doing strategy work - informal conversations, the production of reports, attending meetings and so on - that strategy narratives are talked about, created and presented. It is these 'micro-level practices', Vaara et al. go on to suggest, that give life to the wider discourse. Talk of collaboration, value, innovation, big data, these all give life to the discourse and inform their wider dissemination, whilst also drawing on the technologies and regimes of knowledge already circulating to subscribe to or resist these kinds of talk.

In Era V, close study of the everyday language employed in the practice of doing marketing strategy work will become more important in order to understand the aligning of marketing strategy with the broader discourses of marketing management and strategic management. They share a common heritage and share underlying assumptions and practices. The managerial toolbox is equally similar so how do marketing strategists see themselves? As strategists doing marketing or as marketers doing strategy? What are the power effects of adopting either position? Does one confer more legitimacy than the other? What is the language of marketing strategy, how is it deployed and with what power effects? How is strategy work performed through language? Ethnographic research and textual analysis of marketing texts could provide ideal methods for exploring such themes. Indeed, the role of marketing texts (as narrative fiction) is also an area in need of further exploration.

### **Marketing Strategy as Performance and Narrative**

For Barry and Elmes (1997) all strategy is a form of 'fiction'. By which they mean that it is 'made up', 'constructed' rather than something that is inherently true or false. It is written and communicated through the techniques and practices of narrative-making. The strategy is a narrative, a story to be told. Mason et al. (2015) extend this line of thinking to argue that marketing, as a discipline, has been designed to be performative.

Such a view also aligns with a Foucauldian reading of strategy in which all knowledge is considered to be performative in the sense that it is a re-presentation of reality embedded within particular discourses. There is no single unified reality out there, only constructions of reality that we find either more or less persuasive. The construction, dissemination and preferencing of particular stories over others becomes a consequence of the discursive practices at play – the power/knowledge regime informing it, the relative status of the different subjects in relation to the discourse and the language and technologies employed in constructing and performing the narrative.

The outside world of the marketplace is equally a narrative, brought into being through discursive practices. The narrative of the external 'environment' includes actors (customers, consumers, competitors), scripts (stories that we tell, that our competitors tell and that customers and consumers share), props (such a products, advertising, promotions) and stage sets (such as retail environments and shopping experiences).

There has been significant attention paid to the performative nature of marketing work in critical marketing studies in recent years. Venter et al. (2015), for example, argue that different theories and frameworks of marketing (such as market segmentation) are themselves performative (see also, Araujo, 2007; Harrison & Kjellberg, 2010; Cluley and Brown 2015;

and Nilsson and Helgesson 2015). Likewise, Nilsson and Helgesson (2015), drawing on the work of Michael Callon (1998) argue that marketing is performative in the way that it helps shape and format the economy rather than merely depicting how it functions. Undertaking textual analysis of key marketing texts, the authors draw attention to “the wide array of practices related to marketing and market research involved in creating market imageries and the possible performative effects of these practices” (Nilsson and Helgesson 2015: 20-1).

Every good story needs to be told and in transmitting knowledge they provide access to rich accounts of culture and systems of representation. Within marketing strategy scholarship however, stories and narratology have played a far less prominent role than in other management disciplines. Chautard and Collin-Lachaud, (2019) offer a detailed cross-management disciplinary review of the use of narratology in management disciplines and conclude that although stories feature in brand identity and consumer experience research, marketing strategy scholarship has not followed the lead set within organizational studies.

With attention to the performative nature of marketing knowledge we also need to attend to the delivery, or performance of these stories by marketing actors (Tadajewski and Jones, 2016). The production of strategy stories themselves can take on a performative flavour through carefully choreographed presentations, strategy away days, annual conference, and so on: “Projected onto the screen, strategic titles and directions assume a larger-than-life presence, becoming unavoidably fixed in our gaze. The strategy receives the same privileged viewing status accorded films: the lights go down, we adopt comfortable viewing positions, take in the show, and, if the presentation is aesthetically satisfying, soften or forget any objections to content” (Barry and Elmes, 1997, p. 435).

Following Kornberger (2012), marketing strategy and strategists have developed an array of routines, rituals, props and scripts in order to make the narrative seem more compelling and the performance more believable – strategy canvases, the use of advertising agencies, even theatre and movie script writers, designers and directors to help bring to life their creations. Such performances are also closely aligned with the identity of the marketer and the work involved in establishing and defending their credibility.

Attention to the narratology of marketing strategy is a field in need of further investigation in Era V. In particular, research that explores both the production of strategy narratives and their subsequent performance will allow critical scholars to draw out a deeper understanding of the discursive play of marketing strategy. It is through these narratives that the knowledge of marketing strategy is constructed, reproduced and disseminated. As such, by researching such performances, the identity work and subject positions of various strategy actors are exposed. Such foci will allow us to understand better the practice of marketing strategy. Central to such performances, of course, are the objects or technologies of marketing strategy through which they are delivered.

### **Marketing Strategy as Objects and Technologies**

Perhaps the most visible and tangible manifestation of the discourse of marketing strategy is in the everyday objects and technologies through which it is made real (Jarzabkowski et al. 2013). That is in the symbols, tools and artefacts that seems so mundane, so unremarkable but through which the regime of truth is disseminated, and the discourse perpetuated (Butler, 2018). In this regard, simple activities such as PowerPoint presentations, market research reports, copy text, mission statements, marketing slogans and weekly Monday morning brand

meetings, become fundamental elements of the discourse (Jarzabkowski & Whittington, 2008).

These are supplemented by a vast array of marketing knowledge commodities (Brownlie and Saren 1995) and ‘best-selling marketing devices’ (Svensson 2007, p. 273) that the marketer can draw on to add purpose and persuasion to their accounts of their work: the marketing mix recipes, segmentation strategies; consumer behaviour models, product life cycle theories, that are presented as if they were as “neutral as is a hammer or a screwdriver; they intervene silently upon the world, doing so without taking stand either for or against, only to vanish again without leaving behind any kind of moral judgements” (*ibid.*).

In a related vein, Hackley (2003), considers one of the main teaching aids in the dissemination of marketing knowledge, the case study, as another important technology in the production of marketing knowledge. Case studies typically offer solutions to complex real world problems that have been rendered simplified and solvable through the appropriate tool, framework or mode of analysis. The post hoc application of marketing tools to explain marketing practice further reinforces the power effects of the applicability of these technologies in the real world. As Hackley observes: “Packing popular texts with spurious examples of business success can be seen as a rhetorical strategy to connect the marketing cause with the business effect by textual association” (Hackley 2003, p. 1342). Of course, such technologies, as Foucault (1980) calls them, are never just mundane, nor objective or value neutral. The tools and frameworks of marketing strategy: portfolio management; segmentation, targeting and positioning; the marketing mix; the marketing concept, are artefacts of the dominant discourse, imbued with symbolic value and power effects. It is through the deployment of such symbolic resources that the strategist is able to construct their subject position as expert. This status is not given but created in praxis, through the deployment of the language and technologies of marketing strategy.

To offer an example, Kaplan (2011) details the performative aspect of objects in her ethnographic examination of the role of PowerPoint in the development of strategy. Rather than perceiving PowerPoint to be a constraining force on the presenter and the audience by simplifying content through standardised design templates, she argues that PowerPoint is part of a knowledge production process, contributing to ‘epistemic cultures’ where expert practices are materially mediated. Following Rasche and Chia (2009), she acknowledges the connections between the tools ‘ready to hand’ and the legitimation of the role of the strategist, extending this by examining how PowerPoint affords and mediates the flows of communication, facilitating collaboration and control of discursive practices in the construction of meaning in strategy creation. Here, technology is not simply an object, it is implicated in the processes of meaning production.

For Era V, we would argue that greater attention needs to be focused on the technologies of marketing strategy, in particular in how they are developed, deployed and used in organizations in the strategy making process. This will require an examination of the ‘tools of the trade’, the *accoutrements* (Robinson and Baum, 2019), that the marketer deploys to indicate skill and expertise in their profession. These do not arrive ready formed; they are embedded in the processes which nurture the development of the strategy expert. They are evident in the training of the marketer through the common teaching methods – the case analyses, essays and multiple-choice tests – all designed to prepare the marketer for the work of marketing strategy, but how is this learning incorporated within the human/object duality of what they do and how they do it? Equally, further research needs to address the role of

these technologies and objects as ‘structuring devices’ (Mason et al., 2015) that frame the way marketing subjects make sense of and accomplish their work: how do such tools come to life in the purpose they serve, what, in other words, are the biographies of these tools (Jacobi et al., 2015)?

This extends to questions over how software packages, communication tools and management systems are used in the construction of and processes surrounding the development of marketing strategy. For example, what legitimacy does the use of presentational tools (e.g. Prezzi), market reports (e.g. MINTEL) and strategy simulations confer on its user? How is collaboration enabled, what roles does the tool construct, and how is strategy negotiated through the tools? Which are the most fashionable theorists, tools and concepts of the day? How are they discovered, disseminated and deployed?

With so many frameworks, models and concepts of marketing strategy available, how do these multiple technologies become layered and entwined in the process of developing strategy work? How do they render their knowledge of marketing theory useful in the world of practice? As Jarzabkowski et al. (2013) highlight, although everyday artifacts in themselves may appear quite mundane, when embedded in multiple spatial and temporal situated practices, they perform a critical epistemic role in the name of strategy. Answers to these sorts of question will help make visible the discourse of marketing strategy and open up new avenues for research and theory development.

## **Conclusions**

In this paper we have responded to Shelby Hunt (2018) by articulating the promise of problematising marketing strategy. We have sought to wrestle a space to look at marketing strategy through a different lens, to consider marketing strategy as discourse. Discourse provides a means to attend to the disconnect between academic and management knowledge, in the process engaging with the hyper-reality of strategic thinking.

Within marketing strategy, the dominant discourse can be located within the mainstream Marketing Management School that emerged in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. As with any discourse, marketing strategy is constructed of a range of subject positions, institutions and truth claims through which certain beliefs, ideas and arguments are preferenced whilst others are silenced. In this case, the dominance of the rational model comes at the cost of alternative perspectives on the strategy process, and on other understandings of marketing practice (Gantman and Parker, 2006). The power effects of this dominant discourse have been to shape and regulate the practice of marketing strategy in both academic programmes and organizational performance, from its inception to the present day.

Having laid out the dominant discourse, in this paper we undertook a systematic engagement with its constituent elements: challenging the underlying assumptions, concepts and theories of marketing strategy, not as facts but as a particular regime of truth, one with considerable power effects. Strategy, after all, is a seductive notion and in the desire for success every manager is searching for a template or blueprint, and management consultants and academics are always willing to sell them one. The manner in which this is achieved however raises concerns over representational aspects of strategic thinking. Following Grandy and Mills (2004), strategic models operate as second and third order simulacrum, offering a representation of an organisation and its environment and through simplification, distorting the entity. The generic tools are applied to all organizations irrespective of their diversity and



that of their context. Through the utilisation of expert terminology, a masking of the absence of a reality occurs and new realities are created through their unquestioned adoption and proliferation. The connection between the strategic tool and the market effect is never straight forward (Hackley, 2004) and the risk is that the discourse reverts to its own self-referential signs without wider meaning: a hyper-reality. These templates may serve as useful pedagogic or consulting devices for encouraging students/managers to think in a commercial, market-focused way, but do they offer adequate explanations of organizational success? Can such broad-brush frameworks possibly account for the multitude of situational variables which may occupy management expertise? Or is there a tendency for the strategy discourse to be used to rationalize that which has already happened? In a period of emergent complexity could these templates be seductive details which detract from broader organizational objectives?

By adopting a marketing strategy as discourse (MSAD) perspective, we are better able to expose technologies and power/knowledge regimes and subject them to critical scrutiny. As such, greater use of Foucauldian discourse analysis on the practices of marketing strategy and strategists (and those who consume or are subject to the discourse) provides the foundation for an alternative approach to understanding the world of marketing strategy, one that allows us to move beyond the scientific rational technocratic discourse that dominates the marketing strategy field to one that is both promising and problematic. In doing so, we have posed many research questions that require further attention, such as: How is marketing strategy work done, what are the technologies, systems and processes through which marketing strategies come into existence. How is the discourse maintained? Do marketers really use the many frameworks, models and concepts they are taught in business schools? With what level of success are they met? How do they utilise their bodies and body language to undertaking the doing of strategy? What is the arrangement of bodies and how are they distributed in time and space?

We have also drawn attention to the idea that discourse emerges out of the mundane, minute, the lowly and the obscure rather than through great achievements or breakthroughs. Indeed, Foucault suggests that the birth of the human sciences was an outcome not of major philosophical discovery but from such 'lowly' events as the development of files and records (Townley, 1993). Thus, it is to the practices, techniques and procedures of marketing strategy that we propose Era V needs to gaze.

By organising a rich, diverse and critical literature into a series of mutually reinforcing elements of discourse, and identifying the gaps, opportunities and possibilities for future research our contribution has been to begin the conversation about where a critical marketing strategy approach might take us and we invite fellow scholars to join us as we march forward into Era V ready to problematise our field through the promise of a marketing strategy as discourse perspective.

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