How advertising got 'woke.' The institutional role of advertising in the emergence of gender progressive market logics and practices

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Abstract

The use of gender stereotypes has long been a common creative strategy used by practitioners in advertising portrayals, leading to concern over the individual and societal effects of such representations of women. However, a recent decline in this institutionalised practice has provided the stimulus for our research. As such, we explore the influences that have led to meso-level market actors working in advertising and marketing, to actively avoid the use of gender stereotypes of women in advertising depictions. We consider the role of advertising in a dynamic market system, and the influences upon advertising practitioners leading to the emergence of gender progressive market logics. Linking the experiences of an expert sample of advertising professionals with the extant literature, our study broadens understanding of the central role of advertising in shaping markets. While previous research has examined the impact of advertising on society and cultural meaning, we highlight the recursive nature of this interaction. We find that emergent gender progressive logics have been dependent upon support in public discourses, shifts in professionals' moral conscience, voiced consumer opinion and the market success of trailblazing, gender progressive advertising campaigns. We advance empirical analysis of market system influences that have led to more socially-responsible advertising practices. This study has important implications for understanding advertising's potential to address institutional problems in society.

Introduction

Markets are influenced by complex relational and social processes and the interplay between market actors (Regany, et al., 2021; Baker, et al., 2019; Kjellberg and Olsen, 2017; Giesler, 2008). There is growing interest in how such interplay influences marketplace practices via the transformation of market logics (Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Hartman and Coslor, 2018; Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013) and as outcomes of market actors' institutional work (Thompson-Whiteside and Turnbull, 2020; Baker, et al., 2019; Ghaffari, et al., 2019). Such research is valuable for understanding the role of groups of actors and institutional processes in market transformation. Accordingly, while literature considers the role of advertising in society (Eisend, 2019; Leiss, et al., 2018; Frith and Mueller, 2010), there has been less attention paid to the role of advertising professional actors in market-shaping dynamics. Our research aims to provide further insights into market system dynamics and the institutional role of advertising. We achieve this through the parallel examination of the influences upon the transformation of advertising practices and logics, and the market-shaping consequences of advertising itself. On this basis, our research question is: What are the market system influences operating upon meso-level professional advertising actors that result in transformed market logics and practices on the portrayal of gender?

In answering these questions, we aim to advance the literature on advertising in society, with a focus on the societal effects of gender stereotyping in advertising (Eisend, 2019; Leiss, et al., 2018; Dávila, 2012; Eisend, 2010; Frith and Mueller, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2010; Pollay, 1986). To achieve this aim we use a blend of conceptual methodological approaches outlined by Jaakkola (2020): theory synthesis, theory adaptation and modelling. Firstly, we draw upon institutional theory and market systems dynamics (MSD) as method theories, synthesizing these literature streams and concepts to generate an extended view of the role of advertising in

society as a literature domain (Jaakkola, 2020). Secondly, we offer adapted views of both the MSD concept and institutional theory via our enhanced theorisation of the role of advertising in market systems and institutional change. Thus, while we employ institutional theory and MSD to broaden the conceptual scope of the role of advertising in society, these theoretical lenses simultaneously provide greater understanding of both institutional influences upon, and societal power struggles manifested through, advertising practices. This theory synthesis and adaptation enables us to contribute our original conceptualisation of the recursive nature of advertising, as we uncover dynamic influences on advertising creative decision-making in a market system. The third conceptual methodological approach of modelling, yields the four propositions of our findings: (1) Societal discourses provide legitimacy for renewed market logics and advertising practices. (2) The moral conscience of new entrants to the profession mobilizes change. (3) Collective consumer opinion puts pressure on organisations to change institutional logics and practices. (4) Salient gender progressive advertising has influenced the disruption of gender portrayal market logics. These comprise our conceptualisation of the influences on marketing and advertising practitioners at market meso-level that have resulted in the emergence of gender progressive logics and practices. Arising from our propositions, our findings also show that emergence of these renewed logics relies on professional actors' cognizance that advertising has a distinct capacity to influence institutional and market transformation on social equality issues.

Literature review

We now provide an outline of the theoretical background of the study comprising a review of the relevant literature on market system dynamics and institutional logics. We also

include a concise review of studies of gender stereotyping in advertising to explain the significance of gendered logics in advertising practice.

Market system dynamics (MSD)

During the last decade, a thriving stream of research in the marketing academy sees markets as constituted of complex social and cultural systems and takes as its subject matter, the ways that market actors and institutions actively shape (and are shaped by) them (e.g. Baker and Nenonen, 2020; Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Kjellberg and Olsen, 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015). In accounting for evolution and change, examination of MSD (Giesler, 2008) entails the unpacking of interdependent processes involving institutionalized practices, beliefs and expectations. This approach departs from the neoclassical economics view of the firm and market as separate, dyadic entities, where much of the aim of marketing is to develop a responsive understanding of the market in order to profit from it. Thus, the study of the nature of shared, iterative, and recursive activities of market actors at various institutional levels allows greater insights to be generated (Baker, et al., 2019). Giesler and Fischer (2017) set out how the MSD field of research addresses three problematic biases that exist in previous marketing literature. First, by examining consumer-producer interactions, it is able to reduce the emphasis on *how* consumers and producers variously interact in markets and consider rather, *who and what* shapes market interactions. Second, an analysis of actors, institutions and culture centralises theorising on macro- and market-level structures, instead of the previous focus on micro-level concerns, and considers the co-constitutive relationships that exist between levels. Third, to address the bias towards assessing variance between dependent and independent variables in marketing scholarship, MSD focuses on change and development in markets.

The MSD approach recognises that it is not only firms that are able to shape and change markets; consumers and other market actors can also do so. In general, studies in MSD have to date, primarily taken either a micro-level practice or system-level view (Baker and Nenonen, 2020). Micro-level practice research investigates the role of consumers in shaping markets. This includes the institutional work that consumers do to shift market dynamics and, in the main, it considers the consumer-firm interactions that result in market transformation. For example, consumers are able to work to change cultural and social norms thereby taking on the role of institutional entrepreneurs (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013), developing new institutional logics (Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015) or change markets and institutions through collective acts of consumption (Ghaffari, et al., 2019). Kjeldgaard, et al. (2017) describe how a formally organized consumer association and beer enthusiasts worked together to change the competitive landscape in the market and hence took an institutional role themselves. In many studies, the consumers' role is theorised as that of market activist (Baker, et al., 2019; Dolbec and Fischer; 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Thompson and Coskuner-Balli, 2007). As discontented market actors, consumers are able to work collectively to change institutions through resistance to existing norms and market practices. They have been found to be agentic, strategic and purposeful in efforts to disrupt the market and even effect field-level change (Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Further, consumers are able to leverage the success of social movements and the engagement of consumers with such activism provides them with the co-ordination and power to put pressure on firms and organisations (King and Pearce, 2010; Rao, 2008).

In contrast to the micro-level approach, system-level research examines multiple groups of market actors in the same study in order to provide a comprehensive perspective on market system processes and arrangements, and delineate the work undertaken by actors towards market shaping and transformation (Baker and Nenonen, 2020; Ertekin and Atik,

2020; Nenonen, et al., 2019). Nenonen, et al. (2019) examine multiple stakeholders across institutional and organisational fields to identify triggering capabilities that create stakeholder linkages in the market system, and facilitating capabilities that enable market shaping. Correspondingly, Ertekin and Atik (2020) outline constituents of change towards a sustainable fashion market system. They outline the roles of different groups of market actors within the system and demonstrate their motives and practices towards influencing market transformation. In this research, crises and tragic events, luxury fashion brands, big fashion brands and retailers, designers, fashion associations and organisations, and consumers are seen as change agent constituents of the market system.

While both micro-level practice and system-level research acknowledges the influence of institutions and the importance of actor interplay in market change, there is less understanding of market dynamics at market meso-level (with some exceptions, e.g. Ertekin, et al., 2020; Baker and Nenonen, 2019; Hartman and Coslor, 2019; Kjellberg and Olson, 2017), and it is here that we situate our focus. Little research in MSD has foregrounded the role of the market meso-level, for example via advertising and marketing communications, in triggering market shaping and change (Nenonen, et al., 2019). This is an important gap to fill when acknowledging the inherent idea that marketing and advertising forms part of the societal and cultural landscape. Despite the latter being well-established in advertising literature (e.g. Leiss, et al., 2018; Smith Maguire, 2010; Dávila, 2012), there is a paucity of scholarly research that draws on MSD and institutional theory to explain advertising professional practice (Coleman, et al., 2020; Tuncay Zayer and Coleman, 2015), and we synthesize these analytical lenses to assist with the development of new insights.

Market systems as institutions

Interrelations contribute significantly to the constitution of the social systems of markets. As institutions themselves, market systems provide stability and meaning to social actors within them. Viewing a market system as an institution, comprised of a set of social positions leads to a greater understanding of its distinctive use of shared resources and common outputs. As a synergistic process, the navigation and optimisation of these resources and outputs gradually becomes established via struggles for accepted practices undertaken by market actors (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012). As institutional fields, market systems may be characterised by ongoing contestation between dominant market incumbents and less privileged challengers who would ordinarily wield less influence over their operation (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012).

By undertaking institutional work in the market system collective actors are able to either create, maintain, or disrupt practices that are considered legitimate, however actor agency is a necessary precursor for institutional work that successfully challenges this legitimacy (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). When they feel the need to create or transform practices and arrangements, market actors' success is dependent upon both their social position, and their networks within the market system. Budding institutional entrepreneurs gain access to social and cultural capital in these extended networks in support of their discontent with existing market arrangements (Battilana, et al., 2009). In particular, those actors that are deeply embedded within the market system have the ability to bring about change within institutions and can therefore be pivotal in effecting reform (Laud, et al., 2015). As such, institutional entrepreneurs may be able to take the lead in reshaping markets to realise their own interests, and this may be the catalyst for change (Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013).

Disruptive boundary work, at the interstice between groups in a market system is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for institutional transformation (Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). More directly, it is the existence of agentic boundary actors with the capacity to

undertake work that will contribute to market change. To highlight, an account of how wine promoters negotiated devices and narratives on the theme of provenance in the market system, at the interfaces between firms, and between firms and customers is provided by Smith Maguire (2010). As they come together to address desired institutional change and consolidate alternative institutional logics, networked groups with common goals, already embedded in the field are better able to overcome the constraints of existing dominant logics. At this granular level, shared social and moral emotions are particularly significant in leveraging the required commitment and engagement to facilitate the construction of new logics (Fan and Zietsma, 2017). Accordingly, as embedded market actors, the affective capabilities and cultural capital of advertising and marketing practitioners on gender portrayals in advertising are valuable assets in market transformation.

Market system dynamics and the emergence of renewed institutional logics and practices

An important method of unpacking MSD and market change in extant research has been via the analysis of multiple institutional logics. Institutional logics are organising patterns that are underpinned by symbolic and meaningful constructions of social reality available for organisations and individuals to elaborate (Friedland and Alford, 1991). They represent understanding in the market system of goals and how to pursue them, providing the rationale for practices that are considered legitimate. There are two clear approaches to the examination of logics in the MSD literature. One approach is to look at logics as semantic categories, from a cultural, historical, emergent perspective, employing for example, discourse, narrative or semiotic analysis (Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Hartman and Coslor, 2018; Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Humphreys, 2010). Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015) examined the evolution and competitive dynamics of the US yoga market over 30 years and illustrated the

coexistence of spirituality, medical, fitness and commercial logics. While Hartman and Coslor (2019) identified message framing strategies used in advertising for commercial egg donation that drew from the opposing rhetoric and logics of gift giving, altruism and human egg commodification.

A second approach to the examination of logics sets out to identify institutional processes that lead to the development of new logics (Baker, et al., 2019; Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). These processes are based on the premise that the emergence of renewed logics is usually characterised by a form of contestation, and often by the co-existence of multiple opposing logics, against a backdrop of market-level pressures leading to the change. Market evolution and change is inherently brought about by renewed institutional logics that drive institutional actors to carry out market shaping activities, either intentionally or otherwise. Evolution is fundamentally driven by shifts in macro-, market-, and micro-level factors and accompanying market shaping efforts of market actors that, in varying degrees of coalescence, can lead to disruption in the market system to a tipping point, and an emergence of renewed logics (Nenonen, et al., 2019). Emergent logics can be based on various factors shifting in combination, including, challenges to belief systems; changing sociocultural expectations; the political work of market actors (Baker, et al., 2019); developing business models or bases for competition (Hartman and Coslor, 2018; Kjelgaard, et al., 2017); collective institutional work of discontented market actors (Regany, et al., 2021; Kjelgaard, et al., 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015); or groups of market actors gaining access to mobilizing institutional logics via novel interactions (Thompson-Whiteside, et al., 2020; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010). We add interest in the market system dynamics operating upon meso-level professional advertising actors that result in transformed logics and practices, as we set out to reveal the significance of mechanisms related to the institutional role of advertising in society and culture.

The gendered institutional logics of advertising

In field-level institutional logic, instantly recognizable 'ritual displays' of gender have long continued to been seen as a 'safe solution' by advertising creative practitioners as a method of simplifying communication in short timeframes (Windels, 2016). A wealth of studies affirm that the homemaker/housewife, sexual object and decorative/object of beauty are the key female stereotypes used, with women rarely featured in sporting roles or at work (e.g., Matthes, et al., 2016). Advertising practitioners have been found to vary in the extent to which they recognize gendered images can negatively impact audiences, but have faced pressure to maintain their use from a range of marketplace actors, including brand clients, media agents, colleagues and other industry professionals (Tuncay Zayer and Coleman, 2015). Scholars have highlighted the distinctly gendered institutional dynamics at the heart of the advertising industry in accounting for the historical stickiness of these gendered logics and practices (Maclaran and Catterall, 2000).

Although a small longitudinal decrease in stereotyping, mirroring gender-related developments in society, has been identified (Eisend, 2010), extensive academic research over several decades has consistently found stereotyping to be prevalent across cultures, with females appearing as stereotyped more often than males (e.g. Eisend, 2010; Wolin, 2003; Furnham and Mak, 1999). As a function of male hegemony, the prevalence of stereotyping in advertising places women in inferior roles to men. This is a significant cause for concern because advertising is considered to have the power to influence society and shape cultural meaning (Eisend, 2019; Dávila, 2012; Smith Maguire, 2010), thus perpetuating the 'wicked problem' of gender inequality in society, and leading to harm to individuals (McConnell, 2018). The media has an impact on an array of users' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviour. As

well as contributing directly to *brand-related* attitudes and behaviour of consumers, mediatised advertising has an impact on *non-brand-related* and social effects (Eisend, 2019). In this manner, advertising portrayals can place pressure on individuals to conform to limiting gender stereotypes. Therefore, narrowly-defined depictions of gender play a role in the social construction of gender identity, and have the potential to cause harm through restriction of people's choices, aspirations and opportunities. Arguably even more troubling, are the dangers associated with portrayals featuring objectification, inappropriate sexualization and unhealthily thin or unattainable body images (Middleton, et al., 2020). 'Thin ideal' advertising imagery can cause women and girls, in particular, to internalise expectations about body image resulting in body dissatisfaction, which represents a high risk factor for several forms of psychological dysfunction, including eating disorders, dietary restraint, depressive symptoms and body-focussed anxiety (Grabe, et al., 2008). Of additional grave concern, is the indication from numerable studies that female sexual objectification in advertising is directly associated with a range of pernicious consequences. These include greater support of sexist beliefs and of adversarial sexual beliefs, normalization of male sexual aggression and violence towards women, increased male acceptance of rape myths and self-reported rape likelihood. Further, exposure to this content leads both women and men to have a diminished view of women's competence, morality, and humanity (Gurrieri, et al., 2016; Ward, 2016; Vance, et al., 2015). While extant advertising research ((Eisend, 2019; Leiss, et al., 2018; Dávila, 2012; Eisend, 2010; Frith and Mueller, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2010; Pollay, 1986) has been no-doubt invaluable in drawing attention to advertising, societal and cultural meaning as shared and iterative, this body of work does not elucidate the recursive nature of this interaction. In other words, an appreciation that multilateral market factors shape advertising creative practice and this is at once, a response to the market and an influence upon it, and vice versa. This vantage point motivates our interest in the use of MSD and institutional theory to uncover the

determinants of emerging alternative logics and practices in relation to the portrayal of gender in advertising, greater understanding of which may assist in furthering market change for the better.

Methodology

Research approach and data collection

Given the exploratory nature of the study, and in line with existing empirical examinations of market shaping (e.g. Nenonen, et al., 2019) we employed a qualitative methodology (Belk and Sobh, 2019). Interviews lasting up to 60 minutes were undertaken face-to-face and via telephone with marketing and advertising industry practitioners to gauge understanding of the drivers of change in their practices on gender portrayals in advertising. An interview guide was used and participants were asked a number of exploratory questions (see Appendix 1). In attempting to understand the essence of the organisational experience, this approach sought to gather informants' own constructions of knowledge and decision-making processes. The development of conceptual findings and presentation of the data was based upon the Gioia methodology for building grounded theory (Gioia, et al., 2013), supplemented by *a priori* thematic analysis of key elements of institutional theory.

The Sample

We interviewed advertising and marketing practitioners from different countries, from different sectors of the industry, and at various levels of seniority. This expert sample allowed us to study the phenomenon of theoretical interest from reflective accounts of current practice

(Maclean, et al., 2014). It was not the intention to specifically recruit professionals who had been directly involved in gender equality campaigns, but rather that they were simply experienced advertising and marketing professionals with responsibility for advertising. To find such a sample the researchers used a snowball sampling technique, which started with initial recruitment of participants at the *International Festival of Creativity, Cannes*. The researchers then asked initial participants to recommend other practitioners as respondents for the study. In total, 20 interviews were undertaken in English with advertising and marketing practitioners (see Appendix 2 for participant profiles).

Data analysis

The data were analysed using Gioia, et al.'s (2013) three stage process for grounded theory development, which identifies first-order data themes, second-order themes and aggregate dimensions. The first-order data themes were identified from reading the interview transcripts and listening to the tape recordings, allowing key conceptual ideas and themes to emerge from the participants own words. Once prominent data excerpts had been identified, we coded these for key elements of institutional theory as *a priori* themes. This assisted in accelerating the initial coding phase of analysis, and ensured that themes already given prominence in the literature were included (Maxwell, 2021). Next, we began to look for similarities and differences between the first-order concepts, discussing the interrelated nature of each first-order concept, and thus enhancing the development of new theoretical insights. The first-order concepts were then organised into broader conceptual categories to inform a set of original second-order themes and finally, the aggregate dimensions that represented the four conceptual propositions of our findings (see Appendix 3). Intercoder checks were undertaken to ensure reliability (Krippendorff, 2009).

Findings

The reshaping of advertising gender portrayal logics

Here we provide a detailed description of our findings and our derived conceptualisation of the influences on marketing and advertising practitioners at market meso-level resulting in the emergence of gender progressive logics and practices. Our theorising suggests four main propositions that we outline below.

Societal discourses provide legitimacy for renewed market logics and advertising practices

Many of our participants referred to the prevalence of emerging 4th-wave feminist social discourses (Rubery, 2019; Maclaran, 2015) in assuring the viability of empowered or progressive gender portrayals. They perceived recent shifts in public discourse towards widespread support for gender equality market logics. These logics serve not only to reject previous practices associated with gender stereotyping in advertising, but form part of an active agenda to frame advertising as having the capacity to undo the very harm it previously perpetrated. Our informants provided insights on the shaping role of advertising in markets, and its recursive character in market systems (Baker, et al., 2019). They explained that because advertising both reflects and influences ideological shifts in social discourse over time, it is incumbent upon them as practitioners to ensure that their work for brands represents burgeoning values and developing norms in society.

> We were ahead of the game. Women's rights issues have been there for donkey's years. All the work they [feminists] did enabled us to have more of a say in those environments. People in the industry were still doing it back then, whereas now people talk about it. There is more of a discussion around it in society, and we have played a part in that. (Victoria, Creative Strategist)

New pressures arising from shifts in public opinion and within wider public institutions, in support of gender equality, for example, the wider media; have undermined existing logics, prompting increased legitimacy for a similar shift within advertising institutions. Hence, as professional actors within a market system, they must update their practices based on new information on institutional conditions.

This is part of a trajectory, where advertising constantly pushes the boundaries in society in order to be creative. In the early to late 90s it was more about being risqué with sexually explicit imagery and shock appeals. Now, the rejection of the standard is fashionable; being socially-conscious, being 'woke' [byword for social awareness, Miriam-Webster, 2017].(Nicole, Global Head of Creative Insights)

The moral conscience of new entrants to the profession mobilizes change

Our participants reported the discernable influence of the influx to the industry of women in marketing roles in general (Maclaran and Catteral, 2000), in higher levels of the seniority, and in creative roles in advertising. Strength in numbers, combined with personally relevant understanding of the nature and effects of gender stereotyping, contributes to wide-reaching awareness in the marketing profession of the need to reshape advertising portrayals. A shift in the balance of gender representation in industry roles has coupled with the emerging needs of customers and societal stakeholders for social justice in the marketplace to mobilize change. As embedded professional actors, the affective capabilities and cultural capital of advertising practitioners (Fan and Zietsma, 2017; Smith Maguire, 2010) are valuable resources for the redefining of institutional practices and market logics and, as one of our elite informants, reported.

Having representative staff is very important. Our agency has a selective female policy, which has worked really well for diverse representations in our work and the success of our

campaigns. We've developed highly creative, stirring campaigns because our people are passionate, and have the desire and confidence to be brave. (Rachel, Advertising Agency President)

In alignment with the influence of public discourses, a cultural zeitgeist that espouses equality and diversity also seems to have particularly influenced younger people in the advertising industry (Pew Research Centre, 2020). Many of our interviewees pointed out that younger, entry-level staff have an enhanced proclivity to support social justice issues, such as gender equality.

I think it goes back to the influence of the new generation of people coming into the industry; the new talent. They have cultural reference points, which dictate how they think, and how they work. There are now clear ideas about what is, and what isn't acceptable. (David, Global Marketing Director)

The reshaping of gender portrayal logics has been dependent upon the affirmation of the personal, ethical beliefs of embedded actors within both the broader market system, and the organizations to which they belong. There was a sense that many felt they were duty-bound to disrupt institutional logics and transform normative portrayals of women in advertising beyond stereotypical presentations. As such, they had been able to take direct action as individual practitioners based on their own ethical beliefs. Some examples given for this direct action in practice included challenging the proposed use of an unnecessarily sexualized ad campaign in a mixed-gender creative team; and ensuring that a range of body types was included in a lingerie brand campaign. Practitioners emphasized that such reluctance to use gender stereotypes in the work they are personally responsible for, however, is part of a general industrywide awareness of the need to reduce their use. Nearly all participants explained that their organizations had, in recent years developed procedures to support the development of a new logic of gender equitability in advertising portrayals, for example with training courses or policies to screen advertising content before it is released.

At our agency, the diversity-call is built into our brief. Every single project has to look at how the creative idea can reflect the world that we live in and respect the people in it. There are some projects where we need to show a particularly strong woman because she is our audience, but in general, inclusivity is our *modus operandi* now. (Scarlett, Global Lead: Creativity, Talent and Strategic Operations)

Accessing the institutional work of advertising industry political campaigning groups has also proved influential in ensuring the viability of progressive gender portrayals. The ideological stance voiced by these organised groups, as well as the gravitas they provide has given marketing professionals confidence and courage to break free from the constraining gender portrayal logics that have maintained stereotyped depictions in the past.

Activism is happening. There is fringe representation. The work that the [United Nations] UNStereotype Alliance and FQ [Female Quotient] are doing helps. Especially in mid-level roles, when they're just trying to learn the ropes, emulate superiors, it gives them more willingness to move away from 'this is what we do', 'this is what has always worked.' (Amal, Agency Founder)

Collective consumer opinion puts pressure on organisations to change institutional logics and practices

Our interviewees demonstrated an acute awareness of censorious consumer conversations around female portrayals in advertising, as part of wider discourses about gender and diversity. They were aware that advertising that depicts brands' support of female empowerment and equality allows consumers to align themselves to the gender equality social movement within the act of consumption. As Miranda (Head of Governance, Planning and Content) explained,

Companies are being held to account even further these days. The idea of brands being responsible has gained traction and gives these kinds of [gender progressive] advertising campaigns even more impact. In the past brands weren't expected to play this role.

An overriding theme in our data was that advertisers and marketers are very cautious, and indeed, fearful of releasing content that could be perceived as offensive, based on inequitable stereotyping. Participants referred to the power of social media in driving the strategic value of progressive portrayals of gender in advertising.

There is a shift in power balance towards customers. 'Other' voices that were weaker in the past are now being heard in the discussion, this is partly consumers on Twitter or Facebook. (Nicole, Global Head of Creative Insights)

Social media has allowed consumers to create their own public content, which can be used to challenge and respond to elites, leaders and organisations. We find that towards contributing to the development of new market logics, it provides a channel for the amplification and organisation of consumer discontent. Our informants were very aware that if consumers perceive offensive gender portrayals on the part of advertisers or brands, they have a forum to make direct public complaints to the business and to one another, galvanising the spread of such discontent. Therefore, as brands rely heavily on building consumer trust and affinity, any voiced and visible consumer displeasure with organisational practices, especially on issues of social justice issues, is to be avoided.

It's much easier for consumers to judge these days. When they spot advertising content that is not as responsible as it should be, they are very quick to post on social media. There used to be very little ability for consumers to talk back. You would have to make a huge mistake for something to make the national news. Today, social media doesn't have to have a massive uprising for mainstream media to get a hold of something that's wrong. I think brands are really keen to avoid that. (Dean, Global Head of Creative, Insights Division)

Salient gender progressive advertising has influenced the disruption of gender portrayal market logics

We find that marketing and advertising market actors have taken the role of institutional entrepreneurs to advance alternative institutional practices and disrupt logics. A demarcation between the high profile campaigns undertaken by the advertising industry and the #MeToo social media movement that became widely popular in 2017, was noted. These campaigns included *This Girl Can*, created in 2015 by Sport England, with the objective of celebrating women of all shapes, sizes, sporting abilities and backgrounds, and Procter and Gamble's 2014 *Always Like a Girl* campaign, credited for breaking stereotypes and empowering women. There was a clear sense of pride and purpose in the ownership of such work, and informants indicated that this evidenced advertising practitioners as institutional entrepreneurs and societal trailblazers.

> This Girl Can and Always Like a Girl were before #MeToo. I think the industry were ahead on gender stereotyping, and the MeToo movement came afterwards, affirming what we already knew. (Victoria, Creative Strategist)

Indeed, participants highlighted the significant commercial success of previous gender progressive advertising campaigns as a positive feedback loop for challenger logic, allowing gender progressive portrayals to be framed as a valuable market proposition. As Dean stated,

> Everyone talks about Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty. They were ahead of the curve with their accurate representations of women, understanding different perceptions of beauty, and showing a more representative cross-section of women in their advertising. That's continued across other brands' advertising. (Dean, Global Head of Creative, Insights Division)

In this sense, we identify the initiation of a mimetic process (Scott, 2001), whereby the trailblazing, entrepreneurial activities of organisational actors in the field serves as a 'green

light' to other field-level actors to follow suit. The salience and success of previous ground-breaking advertising campaigns and their ability to engage consumer audiences has furthered the market legitimation of renewed gender portrayal logics. While multiple logics have co-existed on portrayals of gender in advertising, the success of previous campaigns has framed equitable portrayals as sanctioned and indeed, sought, by advertising audiences. In the process of disrupting inertia and renegotiating existing institutional logics they have spurred multiple institutional actors to move toward a common new goal.

Such purposeful institutional work sits as the boundaries between organisational and cultural fields and we submit that the prominent media locale of advertising serves to redouble such effects. Through emotional, passionate storytelling on gender equality issues, value has accrued to brands that have used advertising to traverse emergent market system logics, via the building of audience connection and affinity. Nevertheless, our participants reported that the nature of such advertising appears to represent a higher moral purpose that further legitimises the transformation of organisational logics and practices, as follows.

> Brands need to be just ahead of the curve. When you think about what was happening only 6 months ago, now we have to be even better, we have to look even further. In the advertising industry we are sensing a new requirement of what brands and organizations need to be and do. (Michael, Lead Creative Strategist)

As such, in contrast to the conceptualisation that marketing acts in a 'sense and respond' manner, we detected the emergence a new normative role for advertising. One where professional actors are increasingly adopting a 'recognise and challenge' approach with a clear aim to change both institutional logics within the advertising field, and those in society. Accordingly, our informants demonstrated their awareness of the recursive nature of advertising, and that it both responds to, and informs market and societal discourses. In transforming their own institutional logics, these actors are positioned to drive societal change

and values. By providing mass media imagery of women as empowered and equal to men, professional actors recognise that advertising is capable of leading societal change for the better.

Discussion and conclusions

Our research has focused on identifying the interrelated influences driving change within gender stereotyping in advertising portrayals. In addressing our research aims, we approached with a view of the market as a complex, dynamic system comprised of relational processes (Giesler, 2008). We considered institutional disruption at market meso-level that has resulted in the reshaping of creative decision-making of advertising practitioners. Given our aims, this study makes three key contributions. Firstly, we show that the emergence of gender progressive logics relies on professional actors' cognizance that advertising has a distinct capacity to influence institutional and market transformation on social equality issues. Secondly, our theorising reveals the recursive nature of advertising, as we uncover dynamic influences on advertising creative decision-making in a market system. Thirdly, we provide four propositions that represent the influences on advertising practitioners at market meso-level resulting in the emergence of gender progressive logics and practices in advertising. We now situate the contributions of our research in the extant literature and discuss our theoretical implications.

For decades, advertising has been criticised for its persistent use of gender stereotypes (e.g. Eisend 2019; Eisend 2010; Gentry and Harrison, 2010; Furnham and Mak 1999; Wolin 2003). However, our research supports recent studies that report a groundswell in change and a welcome decline in this engrained practice (Eisend, 2019; Sobande, 2019; Åkestam, 2017; Champlin, et al., 2019; Hsu, 2018). We show how, alongside ongoing changes in the market,

advertising institutions have undergone change. We identify revised institutional logics and practices on equitable portrayals of gender, and suggest an emergent role for advertising. One in which professional actors within the field are more cognizant of both the capacity, and the responsibility, of advertising to influence social norms on equality and diversity issues. This relates to a new more widely-held recognition on the part of practitioners that advertising has a clear social justice responsibility. In particular, our sample of informants were very mindful that individuals and society can suffer negative outcomes as a result of gendered images portrayed in advertising. They displayed moral reasoning and a sense of social obligation (Scott, 2001), indicating the presence of the normative pillar to support an institutional logic of preventing harm through the use of gender stereotyping. We extend previous advertising research on gender stereotyping professional practice (Coleman et al., 2020; Middleton et al., 2020; Windels, 2016; Tuncay Zayer and Coleman, 2015; Shao et al., 2014) that has shown that although advertising professionals may vary in the extent to which they perceived that gendered messages can be problematic, some question the morality of stereotypic portrayals (Tuncay Zayer and Coleman, 2015). However, while prior research demonstrated that societal discourses and institutional forces prevented practitioners from taking action to change their practices, in comparison, our participants displayed a prevalent and overwhelming distain for gender stereotyping. Therefore, in adding to burgeoning advertising research on progressive portrayals of gender (Eisend, 2019; Åkestam, 2017; Champlin, et al., 2019; Hsu, 2018), our study shows the influences upon the meso-level in support of transformation of gender portrayals in advertising in a dynamic market system (Coleman et al., 2020).

We complement extant research that illuminates the liminal role of advertising agencies, as they undertake disruptive cultural and social actions at the boundaries of production and consumption (Leiss, et al., 2018; Dávila, 2012; Eisend, 2010; Smith Maguire, 2010; Cook, 2001; Pollay, 1986), but our utilisation of the MSD concept has allowed us to

further uncover the interrelated, recursive nature of advertising creative practices and social discourses. Advertising has the capacity to transform society as it constructs and imposes culturally desirable meanings (Zhao and Belk, 2008). This paper highlights the cyclical quality of this process in our explanation of how advertising creative practice is informed by emergent notions of legitimacy emanating from the market system, whilst cumulatively driving notions of legitimacy in the market system in parallel. Drawing on MSD research that has shown that those intent upon market shaping must engage in shared, iterative and recursive processes with other actors to establish new market logics and practices (Regany, et al., 2021; Ertekin and Atik, 2020; Baker, et al., 2019; Zanette and Scaraboto, 2019; Kjeldgaard, et al., 2017; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015), we extend insights on the role of advertising in market shaping (Nenonen, et al., 2019; Zhao and Belk, 2008). As such, our research identifies that the cultural visibility of advertising has served to magnify trailblazing advertising campaigns that have promoted gender justice ideals, to the extent that this has expedited the rate of change in the market system, and therefore, society.

The utilisation of the lens of institutional theory in our analysis has permitted a broad consideration of how change in institutions may be linked to the market system and vice versa. Previous research in organisational theory has advanced understanding of how institutional logics and practices may be undermined (Fan and Zietsma, 2017; Battilana, et al., 2009; Friedland and Alford, 1991) as a result of disruptive work taken by actors who seek to challenge the status quo (Laud, et al., 2015; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010; Scott, 2001), as well as the influence of social movements upon market change (King and Pearce, 2010; Rao, et al., 2008). Therefore, we extend understanding about the extant market system conditions that may tip challenger efforts into the lasting adoption of new institutional logics and practices (Nenonen, et al., 2019; Micelotta, et al., 2017). Accordingly, our synthesis of institutional theory and the MSD concept, coupled with examination of renewed advertising

gender stereotyping logics and practices, permits the influences of evolving downstream market consumer needs and upstream market societal discourses to be recognised, as well as influences at the market meso-level. Such an approach encompasses the complex dynamics between consumers and organisations in social context (Chaney, et al., 2016; Dolbec and Fischer, 2015; Scaraboto and Fischer, 2013). Our analysis reveals institutional and market transformation derived from both business performance and meaning-making processes in the consumption of advertising, as well as the shaping role of advertising itself. In assembling various vantage points, our research offers further understanding of how contentious market logics gain permanence under a wider circle of influence.

Our study brings to light profound implications for advertising practice in focusing attention on its promise to influence social justice, and thereby contributes to burgeoning research on marketing for social transformation (Nenonen, et al., 2019; Hein, et al., 2016; Nolan and Varey, 2014; Hult, 2011). By pointing to the emerging value of gender progressive logics within the broad market system, we suggest there are clear business reasons for advertisers and brands to use such egalitarian and counter-stereotypical depictions. In this vein, our informants commented that they believed regulation had only a small influence on their emergent revised practices. Notwithstanding, in the UK, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) have issued a new code of practice allowing advertising that features harmful gender stereotypes to be banned (ASA, 2019). While in the US, the Association of National Advertisers (ANA) offer a gender equality screening metric and training to its members to assist them with developing respectful, appropriate, positive depictions of women and girls (ANA, 2017). However, our informants conceived that any new regulation had followed change that was already in progress, rather than the other way around, thus verifying that revised logics and practices are the result of a range of market pressures. Nevertheless, the vital need to combat stereotypes cultivated in advertising calls for a unified and serious approach

from the various regulatory bodies across the globe. We emphasise that advertising has made a significant contribution to legitimising cultural heterogeneity, and as such, our data demonstrates that being 'woke' has become 'cool.' By framing empowered and progressive images of women as positive, advertising is able to promote gender equality as a wider idea in society, which in turn, enhances the ability of women to embrace themselves as valuable. With the intention of contributing to scholarly and industry conversations and action on responsible advertising to reduce distorted stereotyped representations, we propose that there is distinct opportunity to build on the strength and might of advertising to portray positive, inclusive representations of other marginalised groups in society, for example based on race, age, sexuality, disability, or those living in poverty. However, despite the usefulness of counter-stereotypical advertising depictions in signalling a brand as concerned with inequality and social justice, stereotypes in advertising have been far from eliminated. We agree with Sobande (2019) that there are manifold intricacies and subtleties involved in skewed marketplace representations of gender, and indeed other intersectional issues of marginalisation, that still need to be untangled. Further, continued tensions between neo-liberalism and post-modernism in the market suggest that gender equality market logics may not always be to the advantage of women. While the neo-liberal approach emphasises the legitimacy of the market as a context for individual exploration and identification with the world (Fitchett, et al., 2014), a post-modern approach seeks to expose embedded power relationships in the market, taking a more holistic sociocultural view of consumer value creation (Cova, et al., 2013). In this respect, the ongoing dominance of neo-liberalist ideas of the marketplace indicate the contentious nature of gender equality market logics.

Finally, the limitations of our study suggest future avenues for research, for example, it would be valuable to analyse the detail of social interactions between various market actors at a more granular level. This would provide understanding about the nature of collective

governance strategies that may result in the development and maintenance of renewed logics. Further research could also usefully address how market actors scan for shifting market system conditions, as well as broaden insights by considering the system-level influences upon a wide range of stakeholders, for example media owners, activist organisations, policymakers and regulators. Future studies could also examine market shaping efforts within specific country contexts to better understand how advertising gender portrayal logics and practices may be changing. For example, UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, has launched the Unstereotype Alliance in the United Arab Emirates with the aim of eradicating harmful gender-based stereotypes in all advertising content in the country (Serrano, 2020). It would be valuable to undertake a longitudinal study to assess the impact of the work of a boundary organisation of this type over time. Such research may also present the opportunity to understand more about how advertising actors revise their role within society and the new institutional arrangements that emerge to support revised logics and practices.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Participant interview topic list

How would you describe stereotyped gender portrayals in advertising?

What changes, if any, have you seen in the way women/ men / gender are portrayed in advertising in recent years?

Has your use of gender stereotyped portrayals in advertising changed over the years? Would you use them now? Why/why not? Under which conditions? What are the influences on this decision?

To what extent have you used femvertising/ gender role progressive advertising?

What drives decisions to use more progressive portrayals of gender?

How have audience responses influenced the creative decision to include femvertising? How are you informed by this?

What other factors do you consider when it comes to portrayals of gender?

Appendix 2. Participant profiles

Participant (pseudonym)	Job role	Territory responsibility	Location	Age	Years in current post	Years in industry
Nicole	Global Head of Creative Insights	Global	UK	49	7	26
Amal	Agency Founding Partner	Global	UK	51	4	25
Rachel	Advertising Agency President	Global	Canada	36	4	21
Antony	Senior Global Brand Manager	Global	UK	29	2	7
David	Global Marketing Director	Global	UK	34	1	11
James	Senior Art Director	Global	UK	40	3	12
Victoria	Creative Strategist	Global	UK	24	2	6
Michael	Lead Creative Strategist	Global	UK	32	2	11
Scarlett	Global Lead: Creativity, Talent, Strategic Operations	Global	UK	30	6	12
Emma	Account Executive	Global	UK	22	2	4
Peter	Content Specialist	Global	UK	27	3	6
Grace	Brand Consultant	France	France	52	8	28
Dean	Global Head of Creative, Insights Division	Global	Australia	47	9	24
Naomi	Casting Agency Director	Global	USA	42	4	16
Scott	Content Producer and Digital Marketer	Global	Canada	28	1	8
Katie	Brand Manager	Europe	UK	24	2	4
Miranda	Head of Governance, Planning and Content	UK	UK	46	12	21
Jennifer	Social Media Specialist	UK	UK	47	4	23
Olivia	Category Specialist	Europe	UK	23	3	6
Colin	Creative Strategist	Global	UK	23	2	5

Appendix 3. Illustration of data analysis process

First-order data themes - example quotations *(Respective 'a priori' thematic coding of elements of institutional theory*)*	Second-order researcher-originated themes	Final aggregate dimensions - conceptual propositions
One reason we have a big movement for equality in the marketing and advertising workforce is that it will have a positive effect on portrayal of women in advertising. Some of the big brands will only work with advertising agencies who have reached that equality. (Naomi, Casting Agency Director) *(Themes from institutional theory: L, P)*	**Increased numbers of women in advertising and marketing roles mobilises gender progressive advertising**	*The moral conscience of new entrants to the profession mobilizes change*
Having representative staff is very important. Our agency has a selective female policy, which has worked really well in developing diverse representations in our work and the success of our campaigns. We've developed highly creative, emotionally stirring campaigns because our people are passionate, and have the desire and confidence to be brave. They know how to bring sensitive work to life. (Rachel, Advertising Agency President) *(Themes from institutional theory: L, E, P)*		
"*Activism is happening. There is fringe representation. The work that the UNStereotype Alliance* [#UNStereotype Alliance] *and FQ* [Female Quotient] *are doing helps. Especially in mid-level roles, when they're just trying to learn the ropes, emulate superiors, it gives them more willingness to move away from 'this is what we do', 'this is what has always worked.'*" (Amal, PR Agency Founder) *(Themes from institutional theory: B, L, P, Lg.)*	**The personal ethics of younger people working in advertising and marketing roles mobilises gender progressive advertising**	
"*I know that from my experience in different agencies, there is a lot of communication between senior and junior ranking. Managers take advice from a more junior person, who might have a really good resource about gender equality, and why that should be a condition for a creative idea.*" (Scott, Content Producer and Digital Marketer) *(Themes from institutional theory: L, Lg., P)*		
"*I think it goes back to the influence of the new generation of people coming into the industry; the new talent. They have cultural reference points, which dictate how they think, and how they work. There are now clear ideas about what is, and what isn't acceptable.*" (David, Global Marketing Director) *(Themes from institutional theory: L, P, Lg.)*		

*Key:

BOUNDARY WORK *(B)*, INSTITUTIONAL ENTREPRENEURIALISM *(E)*, EMERGENT INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS *(L)*, LEGITIMACY *(Lg.)*, EMERGENT INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES *(P)*