

How consumers subvert advertising through rhetorical institutional work

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ABSTRACT

We consider consumer subversion of advertising by investigating social media activity in response to an advertisement aired by a global brand. We draw on Aristotle's rhetorical justification to show how consumers used *logos* (logical appeals), *ethos* (credibility or moral authority), *pathos* (emotion-inducing) and *kairos* (opportunity) rhetoric to challenge and undermine this advertising. Our study provides greater understanding of the mechanisms of consumer activism, examining how rhetorical strategies were deployed within consumers' institutional work towards the subversion of contentious advertising. We also examine the work of an organised boundary group to marshal consumer support for marketplace change and identify how ensuing argumentation led to the development of novel message frames intended to de-legitimize advertising practices. We warn advertisers and brands to consider the implications of such collective consumer subversion at a time when the public and media are increasingly intolerant of organisational transgressions, particularly in relation to social justice issues, for example gender stereotyping in advertising.

KEYWORDS

Consumer subversion, Subversion of advertising, Rhetoric, Message frames, Institutional work, Consumer activism, Gender stereotyping

1. INTRODUCTION

Markets are influenced by complex relational processes and the interplay between actors (Giesler & Fischer, 2017). In a similar way, brands operating in these markets develop and evolve through multiple relations between companies and stakeholders. Their value and meaning are ‘co-created’ through dialogue and interactions within a network of market actors, with scholars increasingly recognising the role consumers can play in this process (Rossolatos, 2019; Vargo & Lusch, 2016). While dynamic consumer relationships are often seen as positive, a steady stream of literature now recognises the growing power of consumers to undermine, criticise or subvert brands and their practices (Kähr et al., 2016). Consumers can respond to what they perceive to be corporate acts of irresponsibility or transgressions of social justice (Kachen & Krishen, 2020; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019), taking the opportunity to express moral outrage as a form of brand-mediated identity work (Luedicke et al., 2010). For example, they might become market activists, engaging in what Kähr et al. (2016) term ‘consumer brand sabotage’, indicated by their serious intent to do harm to the brand. While consumer subversion may simply present a challenge to the meaning that has been constructed within the marketplace, it may also lead to the specific boycotting of a brand (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Yuksel et al., 2020). More specifically, negative word of mouth in online platforms is a means for consumers to share dissatisfaction with goods and services, and provides a way to ‘attack’ a brand or established marketing practices. As a result, companies might lose control over brand meaning, which can have a damaging effect on brand equity (Rauschnabel et al., 2016).

A particular area of marketing subversion that is attracting increased public attention is consumer subversion of advertising. For example, brands H&M, Pepsi and Peleton have experienced backlash from consumers who took to social media to express their disdain for ads they deemed to be racist or sexist, generating extensive subsequent media coverage of the

online controversy. In response, each company issued apologies and withdrew the offending ads but the threat to the bottom-line and to brand equity was very real. Peleton's sexist ad led to an overnight loss in brand value of \$1.5bn (Belam & Partridge, 2019); H&M's casual racism forced them to question their organisational practices and hire a diversity director (Stack, 2018); while consumers generated spoofs and memes ridiculing Pepsi for their famed cultural misstep (Wang, 2017).

In this paper we focus on the subversion of one particular area of advertising practice which is attracting greater scrutiny from consumers, namely, the use of gender stereotypes and the objectification of women. Stereotypes have long been a common strategy used to create shortcuts for communication in the short time spans afforded by advertising spots (Åkestam et al., 2017; Middleton et al., 2020), yet despite being contested by academics since the 1960s these portrayals still persist (Eisend, 2019). However, there is now growing recognition particularly from female consumers, that such advertising does not accurately reflect them (Kantar, 2018) and may even cause serious harm to individuals and indeed, society (Duke, 2002; Gurrieri et al., 2016). Concerns focus on the dangers associated with advertising which features objectification, inappropriate sexualisation, and unhealthily thin or unattainable body images (Middleton et al., 2020). Numerous studies also directly associate female sexual objectification in advertising with a range of pernicious consequences including sexist beliefs, the normalisation of male sexual aggression and violence towards women and increased male acceptance of rape myths. Exposure to this content also leads both women and men to have a diminished view of women's competence, morality and humanity (Gurrieri et al., 2016). Yet, despite growing disquiet from consumers and from many within the advertising industry itself, the de-legitimization of gender stereotyping within advertising remains under-examined.

To address this gap, we utilise institutional theory to extend previous conceptual work that sees consumers as purposeful in their efforts to disrupt established marketplace practices (Feddema, 2020; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017; Middleton & Turnbull, 2021; Valor et al., 2021). We examine collective consumer challenges to the legitimacy of gender stereotyping and the objectification of women in advertising, conceptualising it as ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence et al., 2011). While there is growing interest in the work undertaken by marketplace actors towards change in advertising practices, there is still little understanding of consumer subversion of advertising campaigns (Duke, 2002; Kähr et al., 2016; Middleton & Turnbull, 2021; Rumbo, 2002; Wilson et al., 2021). In particular, since rhetoric plays a critical role in shaping accounts of what is, and crucially, what is not legitimate (Cornelissen et al., 2015), we consider the rhetorical strategies employed by consumers as they seek to subvert advertising.

Our study contributes to existing research on the mechanisms underpinning consumer subversion of marketing in the following ways. First, we extend knowledge of how consumers subvert advertising campaigns by outlining the manner in which they use rhetorical strategies to challenge contentious institutional logics. Second, we show that an organised boundary group can mobilize marketplace activists to advocate for market change. Third, we highlight how conflict played out on social media generates emergent message frames that when amplified by the journalistic media may be used to de-legitimize market logics.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Consumers’ institutional work

Through *institutional work*, both individual and collective actors are able to create, maintain, or disrupt the practices and underpinning logics that are considered legitimate within a particular marketplace or field (Lawrence et al., 2011). Fields may be characterised by ongoing contestation between dominant market incumbents and less privileged challengers, who ordinarily wield less influence over its operation (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012). The literature recognises that de-legitimization of institutional logics in the marketplace is assisted by the alteration of *field frames* (Humphreys, 2010). Emergent message frames developed within social movements are important in shaping both cultural meaning systems and institutional fields. Especially in relation to contentious moral, emotional or values-based issues the intentional crafting of strategic frames that appropriate the goals of a social movement can marshal the collective re-negotiation of institutional logics (King & Pearce, 2010). In accordance, disruptive *boundary work* at the interstice between individuals and groups in a field is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for institutional transformation. More directly, it is the existence of agentic boundary actors with the capacity to undertake disruptive work that may eventually contribute to emergent institutional processes. Indeed, formal or informal *boundary organisations* consisting of these networked members may become established (Kjeldgaard et al., 2017), such as advocacy or special interest groups. At this micro-processual level, shared social and moral emotions are particularly significant in leveraging the required commitment and engagement to facilitate the construction of new logics. Whether these new collaborations achieve any degree of stability depends on the interplay of boundaries and practices, as institutional actors work to introduce and institutionalise alternative logics (Fan & Zietsma, 2017).

In analysing the rhetorical strategies of consumers who wish to subvert sexist advertising, facilitated by an organised boundary group, we extend conceptual work that sees *consumers as agentic*, strategic and purposeful in their work to disrupt market practices and

influence marketplace change (Duke, 2002; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017). Engagement with social activism may provide consumers with the co-ordination and power to put pressure on organisations (King & Pearce, 2010) and through collective actions at micro-level they gain increased agency in the marketplace. However, empirical studies of this phenomenon and its mechanics remain scarce (Valor et al., 2021). Thus, our novel context allows a closer examination of such institutional work by consumers as they use rhetorical strategies to subvert the entrenched marketing practice of gender stereotyping in advertising.

2.2 The use of rhetoric as institutional work

There is recognition within the literature that the use and exchange of language may be central to both the production and the reconstruction of institutional arrangements (e.g. Cornellsen et al., 2015; Green & Li, 2011). This stream of literature, termed *rhetorical institutionalism*, considers that institutions and their employees use language strategically and intentionally. It allows for consideration of how institutional stability and legitimacy is achieved through the consistent use of language but more crucially, the central role of language itself in bringing about the disruption of stability (Cornellsen et al., 2015). Engaging in rhetoric is seen as a means to provide convincing accounts, regulating impressions and images in the marketplace, but may also be used to challenge marketplace institutions and their logics as the subject of ongoing negotiations (Fan & Zietsma, 2017). Thus, negotiation through language and discourse is recognised as a contestation practice operating through the co-operation of others, or alternatively in direct competition with opposing views (Green & Li, 2011). As a result, those engaged in this negotiation, including customers (Feddem, 2020; Valor et al., 2021), may engage in rhetoric, intentionally using persuasive language to influence meaning and call for action (Aristotle, 1991). Classic rhetoric assumes a direct link between the use of language and cognition (Green & Li, 2011).

Consequently, those seeking to challenge institutional legitimacy and undermine institutional logics might employ rhetorical tactics to challenge existing understanding. To influence others, actors must consider how they speak, drawing on the three ‘proofs’ or rhetorical strategies originally outlined by Aristotle: *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. While *logos* refers to appeals made to an audience based on logical judgements, *ethos* describes appeals based on the credibility or moral authority of the speaker, with *pathos* describing appeals to emotion (Brown et al., 2012; Green & Li, 2011). *Logos* has received the most attention in extant literature (Brown et al., 2012), however few studies consider *kairos*, a further rhetorical strategy that dictates that, “what is said must be said at the right time” (Poulakos, 1983, pp. 40). This recognises that beyond effective arguments, a timely opportunity is also needed to move an audience towards significant change. In challenging established and entrenched practices that have proved resistant to change, *kairos* may be a persuasive strategy for thinking that has ‘come of age’ due to a specific situation and time.

While some prior studies acknowledge the role that consumers can play in establishing the legitimacy of marketing practices (Biraghi et al., 2020; Hakala et al., 2017; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017), scant research examines consumer de-legitimization and subversion of marketing (Husemann et al., 2015; McCarthy & Glozer, 2021; Wilson et al., 2021). Even less research draws upon the function of rhetoric in consumer interactions; Luedicke et al. (2010) and Valor et al. (2021) identify consumers as moral agents, and link what they see as the increasingly emotional and moralistic discourse between consumers within online forums to changes in the macro environment, notably a rise in populism. To explore these themes further, our study considers the rhetorical strategies employed by consumers as they struggle to challenge the legitimacy of gender stereotyping and the objectification of women in advertising at a time when gender issues are highly visible within the macro environment.

2.3 Consumer activism

Some recent research considers moderators of the effects of gender stereotyping in advertising on brands (Eisend, 2019). For example, female consumers have been found to respond favourably to both to the advertising and the brand in ads that take a gender equality advocacy role (Åkestam et al., 2017). While we have a growing understanding of consumers' positive responses to advertising that advocates for gender equality, we have less knowledge about how they might in fact, subvert such advertising that offends their wider social justice sensibilities. Indeed, recent research examines how consumers may subvert perceived marketplace social justice transgressions (McCarthy & Glozer, 2021; Kachen et al., 2020; Valor et al., 2021) but more understanding of the risks of such corporate transgressions as a result of their impact within wider public discourses is needed.

Kozinets and Handelman (2004) discuss 'consumer movements' that seek to transform consumption ideology and culture. Consumer activists' ideological discourses intended to transform marketing strategies view consumption-related practices as a way to enact a desired change in the marketplace and social order. Consumer movements may be directed towards subverting mainstream consumption practices or they may simply be motivated by higher-order values and a desire for progress (Wilson et al., 2021). When consumers produce and reproduce shared emotional dispositions or sentiments in cultural discourses and practices they build communal and individual identities in society (Valor et al., 2021). Here, consumers are able to take a performative role towards change by elevating other consumers' awareness. Adopting social advocacy in social media for instance, consumers can contribute to the framing of marketers' appeal strategies and messaging and using their own social, emotional and informational message frames consumers can assist in the construction of novel meaning in the marketplace (Kachen & Krishen, 2020; Valor et al.,

2021). Yet, while prior research has examined how consumer interaction in online brand communities may be used to build legitimacy for change (Hakala et al., 2017; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017), we have less knowledge about the performative nature of consumer advocacy and subversion in these contexts.

Consumers can use social media to collectively engage in retaliation for perceived societal transgressions that have arisen from perceived injustice. For example, in relation to gendered institutions, Kachen, et al. (2020) examined sentiments and semantic meaning developed by survivors of sexual violence and harassment in social media, drawing from the #MeToo social movement. Such fearless efforts on the part of activist social media users are not without demands, and indeed rely on significant emotional energy. Social media users engaging with internet-based feminist organization, ‘No More Page 3’ (#NMP3), to fight for the removal of sexualized images of women from a UK newspaper replenished emotional energy through ‘affective solidarity’, a function of the collective (McCarthy & Glozer, 2021). Thus, while consumers produce value through performative labour in social media, they also work towards achieving the Aristotelian idea of ‘virtuous action’ that forms part of a life well lived with others (Biraghi et al., 2020).

However, such disruptive institutional work may rely upon support in public discourses and elaboration in the wider media to consolidate new meaning structures. Recent studies have drawn attention to the role of media coverage in shaping both public opinion and consumer online comments and therefore influence upon changing perceptions of legitimacy (Graf-Vlachy et al., 2020; Pollock and Rindova, 2003). As such, the journalistic media might provide an amplification tool for change (Thompson-Whiteside & Turnbull, 2021), with journalists acting as gatekeepers for progress in marketplace practices via their selection, validation, and realization of what is meaningful (Humphreys, 2010). Our investigation

considers this range of under-explored influences on the role and mechanics of consumer subversion.

3. MATERIALS & METHODS

3.1 Case study context

KFC's *Zinger Popcorn Box* advertisement was released in Australia in January 2020 and broadcast on national TV during a popular cricket competition. The ad featured a young, female festival-goer who is observed to adjust her low-cut top in the reflection of a parked car window whilst two young boys inside watch open-mouthed (Reuters, 2020). A feminist group, namely Collective Shout (the boundary organisation) condemned the ad in a press release and on their Facebook page. Collective Shout is a not-for-profit social advocacy group that aims to bring about cultural change and societal transformation through holding corporations, advertisers, marketers and media accountable for the well-established harms of objectification of women and sexualisation of girls (Collective Shout, 2021). They stated, “this ad is a regression to tired and archaic stereotypes where young women are sexually objectified for male pleasure; and males are helplessly transfixed when confronted with the opportunity to ogle a woman's body” (Collective Shout, 2020). The incident sparked a furore of social and journalistic media activity, a sample of which provided data for our study. Two distinct sides to the ensuing debate and discussion emerged. In our analysis we have termed these two groups, *activists* (those that subverted the ad) and *incumbents* (those that defended it).

3.1 Research design

We employed a qualitative methodology to analyse the rhetorical strategies and emergent message frames used by consumers and the wider journalistic media to critique and subvert the ad. Thematic analysis and qualitative psychology methodologies are becoming more prevalent in studies of consumer behaviour (Belk, 2017; Fletcher-Brown et al., 2020; Pera & Viglia, 2016). As interpretivist scholars we captured evolving phenomena in rich detail from a single case, rather than data composed of multiple cases focusing on one narrow dimension (Yin, 2014). In our study, these methods allowed a richer and more complete understanding of the negative reaction to the advertising campaign, revealing how it was “read” in the marketplace (Luca et al., 2016). Such an approach enabled the novel exploration of consumer subversion of advertising and facilitated understanding of its contribution to marketplace meaning and dynamics.

3.2 Data sample and collection procedure

In line with other studies that have sought to analyse consumers’ rhetorical institutional work (Kachen & Krishen 2020; McCarthy & Glozer, 2021; Thompson-Whiteside & Turnbull, 2021; Valor et al., 2021), the data source consisted of social media comments and journalistic media articles. In following our research aims, journalistic media articles provided a reflection of the content of contemporary culture and societal attitudes (Humphreys, 2010; Percy, 2012). Consequently, this data set allowed us to merge understanding of consumer perspectives and actions, the impact of these on social and public discourses and *vice versa* (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). It also facilitated our thematic analysis process and allowed the mapping and subsequent corroboration of emergent codes from both data sources.

Data was collected from the three-week time period immediately following the release of the ad, January 20 - February 10, 2020. Following Kachen, et al. (2020) we

identified relevant comments posted on Facebook and Twitter in response to the ad using Twitonomy (the API available from twitter.com). Using Lexis Nexis we recovered archival data in the form of news, industry trade press and magazine articles that reported the controversy and consumer backlash to the ad. These articles were considered to be data sources that allowed understanding of the impact of the consumer subversion activity on wider social discourses, as well as forming part of the marketplace response to the ad itself. To extract data from all these sources we used keywords such as *collectiveshout*, *KFC*, *sexist* and *Australia*. Our initial data sample comprised 481 Facebook comments, 2340 tweets and 119 articles. After using Microsoft Excel to eliminate duplicate or superfluous data and non-English language content, the final data sample totalled Facebook, 402 comments; Twitter, 2104 tweets; journalistic media articles, 103 articles ($n=2609$).

3.3 Analytic procedure

We utilised NVivo software (Rossolatos, 2019) to undertake a two-stage sequential data analysis process to explore firstly, the rhetorical strategies used by consumers and the journalistic media to critique and subvert advertising, and secondly, the message frames developed within the arising discourse. The use of NVivo as a computerised tool for qualitative research provides improved rigour by ensuring more systematic and thorough analysis. Following Wallendorf and Belk (1989), inter-coder agreement to endorse the data analysis revealed a 96% overlap between the four coders. The coders discussed the remaining 4% of data and reached agreement.

3.4.1 Stage 1

The rhetorical strategies of consumers and the journalistic media to subvert the ad were analysed and classified in alignment with Aristotle's four types of rhetorical

justification, *logos* (logical appeals), *ethos* (moralizing), *pathos* (emotion-inducing) and *kairos* (timely opportunity) as *a priori* themes (see Appendix 1). Data collected and analysed using *a priori* themes allows broader theoretical sensitivity and ensures the analysis is focused on discovering major commonalities and their interrelationships (Maxwell, 2021). This was achieved via an iterative process, checking back and forth between the NVivo data and the *a priori* themes.

3.4.2 Stage 2

The second level of analysis explored key arguments and counter-arguments employed by market activists and incumbents within the rhetorical debate, and the aggregation of these as emergent message frames (see Table 1). As such, our analysis effectively applies our *a priori* theoretical framework to assist in the understanding of the development of emergent frames. In line with extant research (e.g. Brown et al., 2012; Kachen & Krishan, 2020), we classified the novel message frames that emerged from our data into three aggregated arguments used by activists to subvert the advertising: *criticism of the KFC advertisement; the normalisation of harmful gender stereotypes by advertising; and female objectification on a continuum of harm against women by men*. Each of these are discussed in turn below.

4. RESULTS

In the following sections, we use evidence from our empirical study to illuminate the manner in which consumers and the journalistic media may use the rhetorical strategies,

logos, ethos, pathos and *kairos* to subvert a contested advertisement (see Appendix 1). We briefly discuss the dynamics of the conflict and progression of the debate and elaborate upon the use and function of each rhetorical strategy by the two sides. We then detail the novel message frames that emerged from activists' argumentation and market incumbents' corresponding counter-arguments (see Table 1). We conclude by explaining how activists' mobilization of novel message frames contributes to the de-legitimization of the institutionalised practice of gender stereotyping in advertising; a practice that had previously remained unquestioned in the marketplace. Thus, we present such reshaping of social discourses as consumers' rhetorical institutional work towards marketplace change.

Table 1. Sample of stage 2 data analysis:

Arguments and counter-arguments and aggregated emergent message frames developed in consumer subversion of advertising

| Argument (<i>ACTIVISTS</i>) | Indicative quotations | Counter arguments (<i>INCUMBENTS</i>) | Indicative quotations |
|---|---|--|---|
| <i>Arguments centred on criticism of the KFC advertisement</i> | | | |
| The woman featured in the KFC ad has been objectified | <p><i>This ad is gross and sexist (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i></p> <p><i>The fast food giant has also received backlash from hundreds of social media users who believe the ad was in poor taste...[some] called the ad 'tacky' (ETHOS) (Daily Mail Australia)</i></p> | This ad is just a bit of fun | <p><i>Sorry but the commercial is funny, what happened to being able to have a laugh without everyone getting on their high horse (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i></p> <p><i>Please note when boy sees attractive woman, boy will look #nature (ETHOS) (Twitter)</i></p> <p><i>The whole thing has sparked a debate online. Some people say the ad is "sexist," while others say people need to lighten up about it. (ETHOS) (Delish)</i></p> |
| Sexist advertising harms the brand | <p><i>...The backlash on social media denouncing it as sexist was so vociferous, it prompted KFC to apologize. The quick retreat...underscored how the boundaries of what's considered acceptable are changing quickly in the #MeToo era. (LOGOS) (New York Times)</i></p> <p><i>Getting global attention for perpetuating sexist and harmful stereotypes is probably not the kind of attention KFC had in mind. All publicity is not good publicity, particularly when your brand becomes known for sexism or unethical behaviour (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i></p> | Complaints about ads generate increased publicity, which is beneficial to the brand | <p><i>KFC marketing dept current mood... #HookLineAndSinker (LOGOS) (Twitter)</i></p> <p><i>What you are doing by banging on about it is further promoting KFC which I am sure they are thanking you for (KAIROS) (Facebook)</i></p> |
| Consumers can lobby for the withdrawal of the advertisement, to the benefit of society | <p><i>The story made mainstream BBC Newsfeed here in the UK - well done Collective Shout for highlighting this ad as promoting and normalising unhelpful gender stereotypes (PATHOS) (Facebook)</i></p> <p><i>I complained to the advertising standards council. Any member of the public can do this for any advertisement. Link to register complaints: https://adstandards.com.au/lodge-complaint (KAIROS)</i></p> | Complaints about the ad contribute to partisan modes of gender | <p><i>Remember you need men on board as advocates too. Your headline here is just creating an unnecessary divide (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i></p> <p><i>I think the vast majority of people would see [the ad] as humorous. People please pick your battles and use common sense, society without some comedy would be pretty bleak. (KAIROS) (Facebook)</i></p> |

(Facebook)

Arguments centred on the normalisation of harmful gender stereotypes by advertising

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Female objectification is normalised by advertising and the media, and perpetuated in society | <i>Companies advertise because it has a desired effect, it influences behaviour and if it didn't why advertise? Therefore, the use of the images KFC used DO influence attitudes and behaviours (LOGOS) (Facebook)</i> <i>If we don't call this stuff out nothing changes. These ads teach young boys their response is ok. They hear adults laugh so it's ok to look at a young woman that way. (KAIROS) (Facebook)</i> | There is nothing wrong with men simply enjoying looking at women's bodies | <i>So normal human behaviour is sexist now apparently (LOGOS) (Twitter)</i> <i>The thought police don't want anyone to do anything anymore (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i> |
| Advertising is pervasive therefore stereotyping in ads can cause harm | <i>Collective Shout... condemned the advertisement and said it was a "another manifestation of the 'boys will be boys' trope, hampering our ability to challenge sexist ideas which contribute to harmful behavior towards women and girls" (ETHOS) (Channel NewsAsia)</i> | Consumers can ignore advertising that offends them | <i>Don't like it, turn it off (KAIROS) (Facebook)</i> <i>If TV offends you turn it off, if social media offends turn it off (KAIROS) (Twitter)</i> |

Arguments centred on female objectification on a continuum of harm against women

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| Advertising and media images that objectify women lead to violence against women and other harmful outcomes | <i>[Collective Shout spokesperson] also argued that the ad counteracts the Australian Government's National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010 – 2022. (ETHOS) (Mumbrella)</i> <i>The silence and tolerance predictably leads to escalation by men so inclined. Remember the standard you walk past is the standard you accept/promote. (KAIROS) (Facebook)</i> | This argument is based on exaggeration and hysteria | <i>So even think that you could possibly link this ad to domestic violence is the real joke in all of this. (LOGOS) (Facebook)</i> <i>So, looking at covered tits as an adolescent boy is violence against women? (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i> <i>I think we just need to ban all men ... simple! Or perhaps have them specially blinded so they can't see women. (PATHOS) (Twitter)</i> |
| It is the responsibility of all men to challenge sexism and objectification | <i>What do YOU think we should do to stop violence against women; and stop the man who is murdering a woman each week? Can't wait to hear what you think your fellow men should be doing to learn to respect women (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i> <i>So you would be ok with a boy/ man objectifying your daughters by staring at their breasts? (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i> | Not all men objectify women | <i>Not all men are the enemy (ETHOS) (Facebook)</i> |

4.1 Rhetoric in consumer activism

Within our study, two groups or sides of the debate very quickly emerged in the response to contestation of the advertisement; the market activists who subverted the ad, and the market incumbents who defended it. The ensuing argumentation and conflict between the two factions itself served a function in the progress of the debate. Therefore, while our findings emphasise the development of rhetoric employed by activists to subvert advertising, we also outline and discuss the rhetorical appeals used by both sides. We found evidence of all four rhetorical appeals being used within the unfolding debate (see Appendix 1) but we note that in many comments, consumers deployed a combination of rhetorical strategies within single comments. However, for practicality, in the following we discuss the use of each rhetorical strategy discretely.

4.1.1 *Logos* (logical appeals)

There was little logical justification from incumbents of marketing practices utilising incongruent female nudity in advertising, compared to more frequent credible statements couched in factual terms, from consumer activists. Activists posted comments that were derived from considered rational ideas, for example: *“It’s about this stuff creating a norm and the disrespect that goes with it.”* Incumbents’ use of *logos*, however relied on more singular arguments, for example: *“Sorry it’s called being human”* and *“young lads/ men are going to look [at women’s breasts].”* The arguments put forward by activists rested on a number of complex logical streams of thought. These logical ideas were also included in many journalistic media articles that covered the controversy, for example: *“The 15-second clip sparked widespread outrage on social media, with critics accusing KFC of reinforcing “tired and archaic stereotypes” ”* (Evening Standard). Activists’ comments reiterated the

findings of academic research articles posted on the Facebook pages by Collective Shout, as evidence to underpin the logical rhetoric, as follows: *“As though sexism and the objectification of women do not harm women...? Sounds like you need to familiarise yourself with the research on this topic.”* Much of the activists’ *logos* rhetoric demonstrated understanding of sophisticated ideological concepts; we suggest as the result of engagement with the 4th wave feminist social movement that occupies a substantial position within wider public discourses (Maclaran, 2015). As one activist challenger contended, for instance: *“Does objectification, sexual-harassment, body dysmorphia and ageism make you giggle? Bombarding women with the same old pornified ads perpetuates this behaviour. It tells women to accept a low standard of behaviour from men.”* These analytical, considered arguments on the part of activists were intended to frame gender equality market logics as meaningful, judicious and legitimate, and in Aristotle’s words, form “the basis of reasoned discourse” (Aristotle, 1991). As a mode of persuasion, this rhetorical strategy functions to signify reliability, lending validity to the word of mouth communication itself.

4.1.2 *Ethos* (credibility or moral authority)

The use of *ethos* was a crucial rhetorical strategy employed by both activists and incumbents, but with differing intentions. The incumbents attempted to discredit the activists’ arguments by generally relying on dismissal, for example: *“This advertisement is showing a plausible, embarrassing and, yes, funny moment, and is not a valid reason for outrage! I feel this fake offence truly weakens the fight against a valid cause with the general public.”* In the pursuit of a range of moral notions in the evolving social media debate, consumers appeared to form in-group and out-group collective allegiances, which then bolstered their interactions with the subsequent, mushrooming online discussion. For example, in their attempts to undermine the practice of female objectification in advertising, activists ascribed nefarious

characteristics to the out-group, which were consequently aligned with forms of moral deviance. This out-group comprised KFC themselves, other advertisers employing similar advertising themes, the social media users who supported KFC and, on many occasions, men at large. For example: *“We know you don’t care about girls and women and how they are seen and what they are subjected to, that’s obvious.”* To underscore the function of in-group and out-group conflict in the data, we noted that as well as leading the debate with posts and articles intending to spark dialogue to subvert the ad, Collective Shout themselves also contributed to intergroup antipathy, as follows: *“We’ve been inundated with abusive messages from men defending the ad, targeting our female supporters with insults and misogynistic slurs for daring to voice their objection.”* On occasion, Collective Shout even joined in with consumer activists in the online rancour between activists and incumbents on the forum, for example: *“When was the last time you saw an ad with little girls checking out a man’s ‘package?’”* (comment addressed to an incumbent under the Facebook username, ‘Collective Shout’). Here, consumers and the boundary organisation joined ranks, purposefully and strategically employing a rhetorical mode of persuasion to reject the legitimacy of female objectification in advertising on the basis of moral criteria. Thus, they subverted the intention of the advertising and discredited the brand in the process.

4.1.3 Pathos (emotion-inducing)

Consumer activists used emotion-inducing rhetoric to construct KFC and those who supported the ad as ignorant at best, and misogynistic at worst, as follows: *“I can assure you that rape isn’t funny. But then as a male you wouldn’t get that would you?”* *“I was hoping for more enlightened sponsors [advertisers] in this day and age.”* *“Your misogyny is noted.”* In return, activists were dismissed by incumbents as precious bellyachers who needed to *“get out more”* and *“...chuckle at a silly ad and move on with their lives.”* This social media user

added: *“These people live in a social bubble, rarely exposed to alternative thoughts. But when they are they absolutely lose their mind.”* There were numerous examples of clashes between the disparate factions and ensuing polarised arguments based substantially on emotion-laden rhetoric. Social media users displayed the high level of arousal associated with hot emotions, chiefly anger, which spurred further argumentativeness, contempt and insults, for example: *“Why would a white, entitled, privileged, misogynistic pig understand that?”* (activist’s comment), *“Just another example of a moronic male attempt at advertising”* (activist’s comment), *“I see nothing wrong. You’re doing unnecessary work. Why? Do you want to feel important?”* (incumbent’s comment). There were posts from activists that were emotionally charged with repugnance and disgust: *“WOW! You REALLY validate the point of how objectification is so ‘normalised’ in society these days. Just because YOU like to look, doesn’t mean women actually WANT creepy old middle-aged men leering at them.”* On both sides, the intention of enraged taunts of this nature was to illicit guilt, shame and withdrawal. Nevertheless, we observed that like the *ethos* strategy, *pathos* served a performative function. Thus, as well as provoking a reaction in adversaries, the use and display of emotion appeared to strengthened in-group memberships.

4.1.4 Kairos (timely opportunity)

The data indicated that the strategic and rhetorical use of *kairos* was a particularly influential device in consumers’ collective active work to subvert the advertising they saw as objectifying women. Once the initial effort to publicise the ignominious KFC ad had successfully garnered consumer support, Collective Shout added a follow-up Facebook post to report a response from the brand. This read as follows: *“KFC has issued a non-apology: ‘we apologise if anyone was offended by our latest commercial. Our intention was not to stereotype women and young boys in a negative light.’ A sincere apology for your actions*

and clarity on pulling the ad would be preferable to apologising for other people's reactions." In expressing dissatisfaction in these rhetorical terms, Collective Shout led the mobilization of further disquiet. Consumer activists subsequently consciously used their combined strength to lobby for timely action, urging, for example: *"Farce of an apology until [the ad] is removed. Let's keep going 'til it's gone! Apology NOT accepted."* *"Keep on telling the advertisers that these ads are not ok until our voices are louder than those commenters [sic]."* *"Complaint lodged ✓."*

While activists demonstrated their own actions to subvert the ad, they showed their commitment to de-legitimizing such marketing practices within institutional constraints. Indeed, many of the journalistic articles led their reports with the risks to the brand arising consumer subversion actions. For example: *"Anti-exploitation groups are calling for a restaurant-wide boycott, alleging a recently aired KFC ad objectifies women."* (Franchise Business Australia). The utilisation of *kairos* rhetoric appeared as a culmination of the *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos* strategies employed within the discourse. Thus, towards de-legitimizing sexist advertising portrayals, activist consumers constructed and justified practical objectives to be attained using the emergent meaning developed in their subversion of the ad.

4.2 Novel message frames developed from rhetoric as institutional work

The second stage of our analysis resulted in the identification of three principal message frames developed in activists' rhetoric to subvert the advert. Analysis of the data revealed the key sub-arguments made by social media users and in the journalistic media in support of, and in conflict with these emergent frames (see Table 1). These novel message frames represent market activists' rhetorical institutional work to push for marketplace change in gender stereotyping in advertising. We noted that in rejecting the novel arguments,

market incumbents sought to reframe activists' emergent frames. Thus, demonstrating how the incumbents themselves produced counter discourses and engaged in institutional work to maintain the status quo by attempting to renegotiate the field in their favour. Nevertheless, the extensive media coverage of the subversion served to amplify its effect, and the rhetoric and novel message frames produced by consumer activists were redistributed in media articles. The message frames used to subvert the ad and incumbents' corresponding counter-arguments are detailed in the following section.

4.2.1 Message frame 1: Arguments centred on criticism of the KFC advertisement

In subverting the ad and labelling it as sexist, activist market actors sought to redefine appropriate advertising content. *Ethos* rhetoric in particular was deployed to frame the central element of the short story of the ad - the objectification of the young woman, as harmful and offensive to women in society, for example: "*The advert was condemned as 'sexist' by Australian campaign group Collective Shout, and described as 'reinforcing gender stereotypes' "*(The Independent). Part of this collective reframing was to use *kairos* rhetoric to hold the advertiser to account for what activists saw as irresponsible practice and to call for an apology. Incumbents responded to activists' framing of the ad as objectifying women by employing *logos* rhetoric to provide a counter-frame defence. This primary line of argumentation was to denounce the young boys' reactions in the ad as simply following a natural, evolutionary human response. Further, by using *ethos*, they attempted to undermine activists' efforts to call for ad complaints by asserting that such claims are divisive. This reframing entailed interpreting discussions pertaining to gender inequality as polemical and unnecessarily hostile. Consumer incumbents dismissed concerns about women's objectification as part of a wider societal movement at which they felt at odds. This sub-

frame rallied support for the assertion that so-called ‘woke-consciousness’ is feeble-minded and unconvincing, for example: “*Some dangerous loonies in the world are trying hard to turn men into women and women into men.*” “*The so called ‘woke’ aren’t offended, they are just horrible, spiteful human beings who want to spoil all the things in the world that we enjoy.*” [‘Woke’ byword for social awareness, Miriam-Webster, 2017.]

4.2.2 Message frame 2: Arguments on the normalisation of harmful gender stereotypes by advertising

The key theme of this frame was the contention that for too long it has been commonplace for advertisers to rely on sexual appeals and female objectification to attract attention. *Ethos* was harnessed to vigorously decry the institutionalised marketing practice of gender stereotyping. This was the central assertion of the boundary organisation’s press release while activist consumers and the journalistic media redistributed it: “*The ad is a regression to tired and archaic stereotypes where young women are sexually objectified for male pleasure. Ads like this...hamper our ability to challenge sexist ideas which contribute to harmful behaviour towards women and girls*” (Collective Shout). There was a weighty sense of urgency in activists’ arguments as they applied *kairos* to persuade others of the need for marketplace change. However, consumer incumbents’ argumentation often employed humorous *pathos* rhetoric in response, appearing to primarily provide amusement for themselves and other social media users. The mocking nature of such counter-arguments can be associated with trolling behaviours or performative acts of provocation designed to antagonise an out-group (Demsar et al., 2021).

4.2.3 Message frame 3: Female objectification on a continuum of harm against women

Like the previous one, this compelling frame was introduced by the boundary organisation in their press release campaign in response to the ad. The solemn *logos* justification was drawn from academic research. Collective Shout stated *“To end men's violence against women we need to challenge the foundations of violence... A growing number of reports show how re-enforcing of gender stereotypes - including in advertising - contributes to a lesser view of women resulting in their mistreatment.”* The serious nature of this claim tenably drove activists' outcry and motivated them to engage in subversive actions on social media. In response to such weighty activist arguments, consumer incumbents defaulted to dismissal, rejection or deflection in their construction of counter-arguments, as the following examples show: *“Funny ad. Take it for what it is. There's more to life.”* *“Not all men [objectify women].”*

5. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore how consumers engage in rhetorical institutional work to subvert advertising. Our paper supports and enriches existing literature on consumer subversion of marketing practices (Kähr et al., 2016; Rauschnabel et al., 2016; Rumbo, 2002). Specifically, we extend burgeoning academic research that acknowledges that consumer dialogue may draw on social discourses and market relationships to support or challenge brands and their actions in attempts to legitimize or de-legitimize market logics (Hakala et al., 2016; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017; Rossolatos, 2019). We outline that in a context of favourable and timely public discourses, consumers and a boundary organisation were able to use rhetorical strategies to subvert contentious advertising. As a function of the arising conflict and debate between marketplace activists and incumbents, novel message frames

emerged in the marketplace, which were then amplified by the media. In Figure 1 we offer a conceptualisation of this process to inform future research and examination.

Figure 1. Consumer subversion of advertising as rhetorical institutional work

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Our study extends nascent research that considers conflict in the subversion of marketing (Antonetti & Crisafulli, 2021; Husemann et al., 2015; Kachen & Krishen, 2020). Previous research acknowledges that market actors may adhere to opposed institutional logics, and that these may give rise to both the assertion and defence, of competition and power in marketplace exchanges (Antonetti & Crisafulli, 2020; Husemann et al., 2015; Kachen & Krishen, 2020). However, we assess the mechanics of such interactions in relation to consumers' use of rhetorical language and their construction of arguments as message frames to facilitate the de-legitimization of market logics. In delineating the content of arguments and counter-arguments between market activists and market incumbents, we gleaned the nature of sense-making by both factions, as they vied for one-upmanship over their rivals. We submit that under these conditions, argumentation generates emergent meaning, as a function of comparisons of the arguments of the opposing sides. Our findings

indicate that such polarisation mobilized zeal for the debate itself and heightened in-group and out-group affiliations. Further, our case showed that the performative use of rhetoric in a public forum stimulated the development of revised market logics through the production of alternative frames of reference or message frames (Biraghi, 2020). Therefore, we extend prior research that highlights micro-level consumer-driven marketplace legitimization mechanisms in social media (Antonetti & Crisafulli, 2020; Biraghi et al., 2020; McCarthy & Glozer, 2021; Kachen et al., 2020).

Since language is the vector of institutional work (Cornelissen, 2015), our findings assist understanding of the role of language, dialogue and meaning transfer in shaping evolving logics in the marketplace. Some recent studies in the marketing discipline have certainly been invaluable in drawing attention to rhetorical functions in consumer-led discourses (Kachen & Krishen 2020; Luedicke et al., 2010; Valor et al., 2021). We build upon these by showing that when consumer rhetorical institutional work in social media is amplified by the journalistic media, this in turn, has a recursive influence on meaning structures that influence consumer perceptions (Middleton & Turnbull, 2021). Therefore, such subversion of marketplace meaning structures can amount to a clear challenge to the legitimacy of a marketing practice.

Consumers are able to undermine or subvert brands by responding to what they see as corporate transgressions of social justice, or corporate acts of irresponsibility (Kachen & Krishen, 2020; Kähr et al., 2016; Xie & Bagozzi, 2019). We add to the growing stream of consumer subversion literature that considers how consumers may take a social advocate or activism role (Feddema, 2020; Kachen et al., 2020; MCarthy & Glozer, 2021). Demsar et al. (2021) describe the phenomenon of trolling in mainstream internet culture by two ideological sides occupying distinct and polarised subject positions. Respectively, ‘social justice activists,’ aligned with liberal, politically-correct, social justice discourses; and ‘alt-right

trolls,' who appropriate antagonistic and taboo perspectives around gender, race, sexuality, ability and religion. Our study provides further empirical evidence of how brands may be threatened by this phenomenon and draws attention to potential for such consumer responses to brand actions to go viral.

Finally, we extend understanding of how boundary organisations may assist consumers to subvert marketing practices (Hakala et al., 2017; Kjeldgaard et al., 2017) as we provide empirical evidence of how the work of a social advocacy organisation facilitated challenges to market logics that consumers felt marginalised them, or those they supported. Consumers were spurred to collective action, adopting the rhetoric of a social movement as a rationale for change in the marketplace. We observe that the actions of a boundary organisation, against a backdrop of feminist social discourses, assisted consumers to produce sophisticated logical reasoning and highlight the need for urgent change. Thus, our findings demonstrate that consumers were able to draw directly from counter-logics, assembled by a boundary group, in their deployment of rhetoric, aimed at adversaries on a social media forum. As such, the boundary organisation provided a powerful platform for consumers to subvert a brand's advertising campaign, engage in negative word of mouth, and present a potential threat to the brand's equity.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Limitations

Our exploratory approach has provided a valuable emic understanding of the rhetorical strategies employed by consumers and a boundary organisation to de-legitimize and subvert female objectification in advertising. The single case qualitative data means that there are inherent limitations in terms of the generalisability of findings. This does not

prevent the study from informing theory development but rather leads to consideration of further research areas that may help to provide further validation (Belk, 2017; Maxwell, 2021). We therefore encourage researchers to consider how contested marketing practices and in particular, advertising practices are being subverted, both on and offline in other contexts. For example, similarly to the impact of using female stereotypes in advertising, the portrayal of male stereotypes, and racial and ethnic stereotypes is considered to be harmful to society. Therefore, it would be valuable to understand how these advertising practices are being contested by consumers and other market actors. Further, we call for future research that examines how consumers may challenge and subvert advertising that is directed towards vulnerable consumers, for example, advertising for betting and gambling; short term and payday loans; or products high in fat, sugar or salt to children (ASA, 2021).

6.2 Managerial implications

Our findings have important resonance for brand managers and for the development of brands' future marketing communications strategies. We identify the potential for damage to brands when advertising is subverted by consumers. In particular, we have shown that consumers generate negative word of mouth and outline how debate can encourage consumers to make official complaints and lead to a call for brand boycotts. Moreover, we find that a brand can become embroiled at the centre of a fierce social media debate, which when reported in the journalistic media can leave the organisation itself deemed, 'anti-progressive.' In this light, we suggest that brand owners may wish to consider the effects of negative responses to advertising on their brand. With an awareness that consumers may subvert marketing messages, we suggest that brands attempt to determine the potential for negative impact of marketing. Thus, brands could assess any decreases in market share as a result of consumer contestation of marketing practices. This could be achieved by measuring

the scale of negative and positive comments, and the overall direction of sentiment in social media comments. More importantly, brands should ensure that they both scan for, and appraise the scope, of wider media coverage of controversial marketing practices. Such an approach will allow consideration of both, short term outcomes of negative word of mouth and brand boycotts, and potential longer-term effects on brand equity.

Brands should also be encouraged to consider the wider societal negative impact of their advertising. Objectified and stereotyped portrayals of women in advertising contribute to the devaluing of women in society. They have been found to have alarming effects on women, causing serious harm to self-esteem and body image (Gurrieri et al., 2016). As well as being disempowering for women, showing women in such roles has serious implications for how men view women and has considerable impact on the morale and ethical fabric of society. To avoid contributing to such social injustice, brands should consider screening advertising as part of the overall creative development stage to ensure that there are no potentially damaging societal effects. As part of this process, it would be wise to implement mandatory training for marketing communications practitioners on equality, diversity and inclusion, which should provide an evidence basis for the potential impact of harmful messages on consumers.

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Catalyst for deployment of rhetoric

Responses by marketplace Activists and Incumbents

Rhetorical strategies used in marketplace debate and argumentation

Contested advertisement



Activist boundary organisation
Consumers in social media
Journalistic media



Logos (logical appeals)
Ethos (moralizing)
Pathos (emotion-inducing)
Kairos (timely opportunity)



Emergent message frames in the marketplace



Subversion of advertising

Appendix 1. Sample of stage 1 data analysis: Activists' and incumbents' use of rhetorical strategies

| <i>A priori</i> themes | Activist rhetoric | Incumbent rhetoric |
|---|--|--|
| Logos rhetoric (logical appeals) | <i>The attitude towards women which enables bottom pinching, lecherous comments, and ogling, is the same attitude that enables and promotes sexual assault</i> (Facebook) | <i>Naturally that's what kid boys do to their moms and grand moms. These are emotions of nature, not sin, or sexist.</i> (Twitter) <i>No, it's called nature and it is the result of evolution ffs.</i> (Twitter) |
| Ethos rhetoric (moralizing) | <i>This is throwback primetime sexism as entertainment from KFC. So, what are we telling our young boys about women?</i> (Twitter) <i>The problems here are that we're talking about pre-teens, and that there's no indication whatsoever in the ad that what they're doing is wrong.</i> (Campaign Asia) | <i>Wow. The fun police are out in full force. Guys will always like to look at nice boobs ... Sorry.</i> (Facebook) <i>While many viewers did not approve of the ad, some took to Twitter to label the ad "funny" and said there was no need for the company to apologise.</i> (The Straits Times) |
| Pathos rhetoric (emotion-inducing) | <i>Imagine how supporters of this distastefully heterosexist ad would work themselves into a lather if the boy in the front seat was ogling a man's bulge! THAT would be humorous. In its current state it's just not.</i> (Twitter) | <i>Well in woke world that would never happen because: - A) The boys don't know what breasts are. B) They're still deciding if they want their own. & C) They're self-identifying as a train today.</i> (Twitter) <i>On Twitter, commenters didn't seem quite as bothered. One said: "You forgot to add the word [Collective Shout is] 'pathetic'..."</i> (news.com.au) |
| Kairos rhetoric (timely opportunity) | <i>The silence and tolerance predictably lead to escalation by men so inclined. Remember the standard you walk past is the standard you accept/promote.</i> (Facebook) [Marketing experts said:] <i>"In the 1960s advertisers were blissfully unaware of the impacts of casual sexism and stereotypes. We now have ample evidence it's not just harmless fun. It's time for the industry to show it's not living in the past."</i> (Franchise Business Australia) | <i>The puritanical scolds attacking this funny ad are the ones who should apologize. @kfc should stand by the ad. How is it sexist? No one is harmed or demeaned. Who decided that male attraction to females is sexist?</i> (Twitter) <i>If women don't want men to look at there [sic] chest they should keep them covered up.</i> (Twitter) |