

Title: Marketing career transitions: women marketers embedded in the profession?

Summary

This qualitative study explores a UK sample of 25 women marketing professionals and how their career paths are reached and moderated over time. The research addresses the women's reasons for moving from corporate marketing careers to self-employment in marketing and discovers that their career anchor is their embeddedness in the marketing profession which remains a constant throughout their career. This suggests that marketing talent is being lost to the corporate environment but not necessarily to the profession. It also suggests that the profession needs to acknowledge these career transitions when offering support to those practicing marketing.

Track: Marketing and Retail

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Introduction

There is limited research which explores women's careers in professions, such as marketing, which are relatively new, have only recently become feminised and present an attractive career option if female take up of marketing degrees and graduate employment are seen as signals (Bruegel, 2000; HESA, 2008). Yet statistics indicate that there is a penalty to pay for being a female in marketing. It is estimated, for example, that the gender pay gap between male and female marketing directors in the UK is £17,000, and male marketing managers earn 10% more than female marketing managers (Marketing Week, 2014). As Maclaren and Catterall (2000) argue knowledge of women working in other professions like medicine, teaching and banking is evident, yet the experience of women working in marketing is largely anecdotal. There is a need, therefore, for empirical work which aids our understanding of the careers of women working in recently feminised industries like marketing, particularly as research in marketing has a tendency to explore gender issues from the consumer's point of view rather than those 'doing' the marketing work (Beetles and Harris, 2005; Maclaren and Catterall, 2000). This paper explores the career transitions of women in the marketing sector reporting the qualitative stage of a mixed methods study. The first stage of the study (reported elsewhere, Foster *et al.*, 2011) which was a quantitative analysis of the Labour Force Survey over the last decade, concluded that the marketing industry remains feminised, in that more women than men are employed in the industry but fewer women than men work in senior roles (Maclaren and Catterall, 2000; Broadbridge 2008; Bradley and Healy, 2008). Findings from this first phase also indicated that a proportion of older women with children had made the transition from corporate marketing to self-employment in marketing.

This study therefore builds upon the quantitative stage by exploring qualitatively how the career aspirations of female marketers are reached or moderated over time. The aim of the second phase of the study and focus of this paper is:

- To explore the women's reasons for moving from corporate marketing careers to self-employment in marketing
- To understand why these women remained as marketers during their career
- To highlight the impact these findings have for the wider marketing profession

Literature

Despite Maclaren *et al.*'s (1998) and Maclaren and Catterall's (2000) papers, published over a decade ago, there is a paucity of new research which explores female careers in marketing and as Maclaren and Catterall (2000) argue, by neglecting the private sphere of these women we are negating the experience of those that 'do' marketing work. Indeed, several academics have discussed the apparent chasm between marketing theory and practice (see Hunt, 2002). Extrapolating this debate to careers exposes a potential further cleave between what the profession offers in terms of careers and what in practice is the reality of a marketing career for women. A further ingredient to the debate is that of 'is marketing a profession?' (Brown *et al.*, 2005; Enright, 2006). This debate is particularly salient when adopting a gender lens, as the limited research which does exist, suggests that marketing roles are segregated according to gender with strategic and prestigious marketing work regarded as masculine activities and women dominating less influential roles in 'softer' customer facing sectors such as PR, customer service and advertising (Alvesson, 1998; Chalmers, 2001; Krider and Ross, 1997; Maclaren and Catterall, 2000). Debates that boundary the profession have the potential to exclude women i.e. if particular roles, such as those which are less influential, are not seen as part of the marketing profession. Thus, for this study we have allowed the female participants to self-select themselves as marketing professionals. Moreover, other studies have highlighted how caring responsibilities have impacted on the careers of female marketers. Work by Krider and Ross (1997), for example, highlights how women's careers in PR are likely to be affected by the competing demands of work and family life. This lack of understanding regarding women's careers in marketing is a disservice not only to those women currently practising marketing but to those students aspiring to work as marketers. Given these issues it is important to contextualise the debate concerning women marketers in the wider careers literature.

More generally, women are likely to have complex non-linear careers which are different to men. These are typified by transition periods that coincide with a woman's life stages and reflect the demands of balancing work with caring responsibilities, and the organisational and cultural constraints they might experience (Lovejoy and Stone, 2011; White, 1995). Increasingly then, women are likely to have a protean career which is internally driven and which reflects their own values and interests rather than one determined by their employer. These internal drivers consist of all the person's varied experiences in education, training, work in several organisations and changes in occupational field (Hall, 1976). In particular, the occupation or industry may act as a career anchor or 'compass' which provides a sense of security for the individual throughout their working life (Schein, 1978; Peel and Inkson, 2004). In terms of pertinent career literature therefore, this study draws from the concept of a protean career and the extent to which a profession, in this case marketing, can act as a career anchor for women working in the industry. This study therefore addresses Briscoe *et al.*'s (2006) call for empirical work of the protean career model.

Methodology

Twenty five SME case businesses were used for the study. These were selected on the basis that each business was owned by a woman, provided a marketing service and were based in the UK. Each owner had also previously worked in a marketing role for a large organisation prior to setting up their own business. Identification of suitable case businesses was through convenience and snowball sampling (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2008). The researchers used their personal and professional contacts to access the businesses as this was felt to be the most appropriate approach given that SMEs are often reluctant to engage with

academia and can be a population that is difficult to identify (Short *et al.*, 2010). Materials were primarily collected through qualitative interviews with the women owners but supplementary information was also taken from documentary evidence such as marketing literature and the company website. Themes explored in the interviews included: the purpose and nature of their business, their role in the business, their career history, their personal and business related aspirations, their experiences of running the business, reasons for starting the business and why they worked in marketing. Participants were encouraged to tell their personal stories and to explore the factors influencing their career choice and the relationships between them (Perren and Ram, 2004; Brush *et al.*, 2009). Each interview was digitally recorded and lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The transcribed interviews and documentary evidence were analysed using Template Analysis (Waring and Wainwright, 2008). This enabled the researchers to make sense of the rich, qualitative materials through the initial identification of broad themes which then became narrower and more specific.

Preliminary findings

The initial analysis of the interviews reveals that continuing gender norms, burdening women with the majority of household labour, exacerbate difficulties for women attempting to break the glass ceiling within corporate marketing, acting as a driver for movements into self-employment. This study therefore reflects findings from similar studies in other sectors which report the lack of women in senior positions and the factors hindering progression more generally (Sealy *et al.*, 2009). The need for flexibility and autonomy are also key prompts for career transitions into marketing self-employment for the participants. These findings thus support previous studies investigating the ‘pull’ and ‘push’ factors, such as the employment policies and practices of organisations, encouraging women into self-employment irrespective of the sector (Hughes, 2003; Sorensen and Sharkey, 2014).

What is of more interest though is that the move to self-employment reflects the fact that these women have gained sufficient knowledge and expertise in marketing to move or rather ‘morph’ into self-employment. For these women, their professional association with marketing was considered to be a ‘calling’ where their values/interest remained stable in their working lives. This professional tie therefore appears to be acting as a career anchor throughout their ‘patchwork’ career (Bateson, 1990). The findings also reveal that a further contributor to this professional tie is how other social and economic ties, such as where the women are located, their domestic arrangements and their philanthropic marketing work with the local community, makes them less likely to return back to corporate marketing or leave the profession entirely. The extent to which these women are embedded in a network of intertwined social and economic ties therefore appears to be keeping these self-employed women in the marketing profession (Welter, 2011). This leads to a particular enactment of a marketing career which is different to those experienced by women in corporate employment. Furthermore, the careers of self-employed women in marketing are not only different to those working in organisations but also different from one another.

If this developmental paper is accepted, further work will be conducted to understand how the professional tie and other ties embed women in marketing, particularly when they move into self-employment and remain so for their career.

Implications

The preliminary findings suggest that expectations surrounding careers in marketing, particularly for female graduates, should be managed accordingly so that any lack of career

success or progression is not necessarily attributed to the individual but instead to the nature of the industry and organisational assumptions held about working mothers (Gatrell, 2011; Maclaren and Catterall, 2000). New-starters need to be informed that there are inherent problems with the sector that they do not have control over. Furthermore, it supports the need for career guidance to marketing students should address the nature of portfolio career in the marketing profession.

The lack of women in senior marketing roles also has implications for the marketing curriculum. Since marketing education is dominated by examples taken from large organisations, it is unlikely that this will reflect the experiences of women working in the industry and those that work for themselves. Marketing discourse, therefore, is masculine and likely to remain so because it reflects the gender profile of those people making marketing decisions in large organisations (Beetles and Harris, 2005; Maclaren and Catterall, 2000).

This study also has implications for the CIM. The CIM has published a series of White Papers ('The Future for Marketing Capability', 'Shape the Agenda' and 'How Can I Manage My Career Development?'). The paper focussed on capability in particular, considers the "people, skills, talent, learning and people development" yet this does not consider the impact of the conflicting roles women in the industry are facing. As our analysis has illustrated women appear to experience a mid-career transition phase where they leave corporate marketing roles. Whilst these women may continue to use their CIM qualifications, the professional body does not appear to offer specific engagement with these women at this particular career stage. This is compounded by the statement in the Shape the Agenda paper which looks at SMEs which says "we are not yet in a position to offer...tailored localised help through all its branches". Those women moving to self-employment are therefore again largely unsupported by the professional body. Furthermore, the career development paper whilst promoting the currency of CIM qualifications, does not specifically address the portfolio nature of careers especially for women.

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